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Between Crisis and Persistence: Interpreting Democracy Narratives in the Pacific Islands

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Between Crisis and Persistence: Interpreting Democracy Narratives in the Pacific Islands

In this article I highlight how crisis and persistence are co-dependent narratives employed to describe democracy in the Pacific Islands. I outline six explanatory storylines and illustrate how they interact temporally and spatially. Rather than interpreting these representations as opposed – one explanation against the other – I show that they are co-dependent. By exploring the tensions within narratives I create a counter-story that privileges a messy and contingent world of ‘narratives-in-interaction’, where meanings are negotiated and co-produced by theorists and policy-makers. I conclude by arguing that this type of narrative analysis enables us to better understand how the taken-for-granted assumptions that are embedded within policy storylines inform governing practices.

Keywords: Democracy, Pacific Islands, counter-narratives, counter-stories, storylines, interpretivism.

Introduction

The job of most history and social science is to summarize, codify and otherwise “package” important social movements and major historical events, to make them legible and understandable. Given this objective and the fact that the events they are seeking to illuminate have already happened, it is hardly surprising that historians and social scientists should typically give short shrift to the confusion, flux and

*tumultuous contingency experienced by the historical actors, let alone the ordinary by-standers, whose actions they are examining.*¹

This description of academic practice points to the way(s) scholars create and employ narratives to explain the real world of human action. Narratives, in this context, are sense-making devices that ascribe meanings to people, places and events. They are signifiers – a type of intellectual shorthand that allows us to quickly convey taken-for-granted assumptions – that become embedded within institutions and their policies. In doing so, they move from being theoretical heuristics that provide a plausible explanation for a particular phenomenon, to a basis for action. In short, they become endogenous to the policy process - they exist within it and are produced by it.² If this all sounds too esoteric, consider this example of immediate relevance to democratic practice in the Pacific Islands. At a recent donor funded meeting participants – mostly politicians and senior civil servants – were asked to split into three groups to discuss the workshop’s papers on democracy and democratisation and propose solutions. Seamlessly, Melanesian, Polynesian and Micronesian groupings (luckily Fiji wasn’t represented so there was no confusion) appeared and what began as an early (often racist) European representation of diversity, that later informed colonial administrative policy³, came full circle as the ‘subjects’ of study acted out its findings. Narratives, in short, influence how we understand the social world and act within it.

In the spirit of Anthony Van Fossen’s book *South Pacific Futures*, I show that this same dynamic, where narratives and actions interact and are (re)negotiated in the messy and contingent world of political practice, is at work in the literature and associated policy agenda

¹ James C. Scott, *Two Cheers for Anarchism* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2012), pp 133-34.

² Carol Bacchi, *Analysing Policy: What's the Problem Represented to Be?* (Pearson, Australia, 2009), p x.

³ For discussion see Nicholas Thomas, ‘The Force of Ethnology,’ *Current Anthropology* 30, no. 1 (1989).

on democracy and democratisation in the Pacific Islands.⁴ Following the ‘narrative turn’ across the social sciences, the terms ‘master’ and ‘counter’ narratives or stories have a relatively wide usage with the former associated with dominance and the status quo and the latter with subversion and adjustment.⁵ From the late 1980s, the master narrative about democracy in the region has persistently portrayed ‘crisis’. The Rodney Cole edited *Pacific 2010* introduced the ‘doomsday scenario’ where a combination of economic stagnation and rising population inevitably resulted in growing poverty and crime, undermining fragile political institutions.⁶ This pessimistic view of the contemporary Pacific was followed by Paul Dibb’s ‘arc of instability’ metaphor and Ben Reilly’s ‘Africanisation’ thesis.⁷ And yet, despite seemingly insurmountable obstacles and perpetual crisis, and with important exceptions like coups in Fiji and civic unrest in Solomon Islands, democratic government largely persists, elections are held (around 200 regionally since the 1960s), while parliamentary representation and decision-making are principally maintained, leading some theorists and policy-makers to ask: why? ‘Persistence’ then becomes an explanation employed in opposition to the depiction of ‘crisis’, with exponents either arguing that conditions are not as critical as portrayed, or that the seemingly inevitable product of ‘crisis’ – the collapse of democratic government – has failed to eventuate.

The standard move in the existing literature on democracy, both in the Pacific and elsewhere, is to identify and privilege the significance of certain explanatory variables and then make causal inferences about their impact on democratic transition and practice. In this article I

⁴ Anthony Van Fossen, *South Pacific Futures: Oceania toward 2050* (Brisbane: The Foundation for Development Cooperation, 2005).

⁵ See Anthony Rudd, ‘In Defence of Narrative,’ *European Journal of Philosophy* 17, no. 1 (2007); Hilde Lindemann Nelson, *Damaged Identities, Narrative Repair* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001); Michael and Bamberg and Molly Andrews (eds.), *Considering Counter-Narratives: Narrating, Resisting, Making Sense* (Amsterdam and Philadelphia: John Benjamins,2004); Lynn Harter, ‘Narratives as Dialogic, Contested, and Aesthetic Performances’, *Journal of Applied Communication Research* 37, no. 2 (2009).

⁶ Rodney Cole, ed. *Pacific 2010 : Challenging the Future* (Canberra: National Centre for Development Studies, Research School of Pacific Studies, Australian National University,1993).

⁷ Paul Dibb, David Hale, and Peter Prince, ‘Asia’s Insecurity,’ *Survival* 41, no. 3 (1999): 18. Ben Reilly, ‘The Africanisation of the South Pacific,’ *Australian Journal of International Affairs* 54, no. 3 (2000).

take a different approach. Rather than privileging one variable or model over another, I reconstitute these variables as narratives that are employed to make sense of democratic practice in the Pacific Islands through the terms ‘crisis’ and ‘persistence’. I make two moves. Firstly, I outline six explanatory storylines – culture; state strength / fragmentation; size; civil society; institutions, electoral systems and constitutions; and international intervention and foreign aid – employed by scholars working in the contemporary Pacific to describe democratic practice as either in a state of ‘crisis’ or ‘persistence’. I do not seek to champion one argument – although, as I will illustrate, some resonate more with certain countries and eras than others – but rather aim to understand their internal composition and tease out what can be learnt by looking at how these narratives are created and sustained by theorists and policy makers. Consequently, I do not provide a one-size-fits-all definition of democracy or democratisation but have rather reviewed the extant literature that self-identifies with the study of politics in the Pacific Islands, as well as case studies that illuminate the arguments contained in each body of work, to critically examine the different ways this phenomenon is conceptualised and understood. The method then is interpretive (typically constructivist-subjectivist) and, following the conventions of this type of research, the standard is plausibility: of narratives that resonate with and reflect the lived world of policy practice.⁸

Secondly, I argue that these representations are in fact co-dependent.⁹ As Hilde Lindemann Nelson highlights, ‘counter-stories’ are created through an ongoing relationship with the narrative they resist as critics internalise and reproduce explanatory norms.¹⁰ That is, exponents of both ‘crisis’ and ‘persistence’ tend to use the same six storylines, albeit in

⁸ For further discussion see Dovra Yanow, ‘Qualitative-Interpretive Methods in Policy Research,’ in Frank Fischer, Gerald J Miller, and Mara S Sidney (eds.), *Handbook of Policy Analysis: Theory, Politics and Methods* (Boca Raton: CRC Press, 2007); Mark Bevir, ‘Public Administration as Storytelling,’ *Public Administration* 89, no. 1 (2011); Sonia Ospina and Jennifer Dodge, ‘It’s About Time: Catching Method up to Meaning - the Usefulness of Narrative Inquiry in Public Administration,’ *Public Administration Review* 65, no. 2 (2005).

⁹ Michael Bamberg, ‘Considering Counter Narratives,’ in Michael and Bamberg and Molly Andrews (ed.), *Considering Counter-Narratives: Narrating, Resisting, Making Sense* (Amsterdam and Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 2004).

¹⁰ Hilde Lindemann Nelson, *Damaged Identities, Narrative Repair*, p 169.

support of opposing arguments. In this way, the two narratives act as intellectual ‘straw-men’ through which policy actors seek to make sense of the political world; they are ‘mobilising metaphors’ that serve as a rallying point for policy makers who, in practice, require a shared repertoire.¹¹ Table 1 aims to map this interplay but even this heuristic, which is designed to clarify and provide a sense of conceptual order, is misleading as a thorough exploration of the existing literature highlights that in contrast to the goal of clear and sanitised theorising that privileges the causal significance of one variable, these perspectives overlap, they don’t have to be mutually exclusive, with some scholars drawing on multiple storylines to analyse the experiences of individual countries and certain eras, while others engage in a version of Orwellian ‘doublethink’ by holding seemingly contradictory views in tension.¹²

By showing how storylines are used to simultaneously perpetuate a sense of ‘crisis’ and ‘persistence’, I produce a new counter-story that privileges a messy and contingent world of ‘narratives-in-interaction’,¹³ where the rationale for policy interventions are continually co-produced and (re)negotiated, and the purpose of storylines can be gauged by their capacity to influence how political actors make sense of the social world. In which case, to return to the workshop example above, from the vantage point of this article, whether or not participants whole-heartedly agreed with those categorisations is somewhat immaterial; what matters is that they help make sense of the ‘confusion, flux and tumultuous contingency’ Scott describes. In turn, the significance of this approach for students of politics and would-be-reformers of political institutions in the Pacific Islands lies in its capacity to illustrate how taken-for-granted assumptions are embedded within the policy storylines that inform reform efforts. In this respect, the explanatory power of ‘crisis’ and ‘persistence’ is coupled to the

¹¹ David Mosse, ‘Is Good Policy Unimplementable? Reflections on the Ethnography of Aid Policy and Practice,’ *Development and Change* 35, no. 4 (2004), p 663.

¹² Claudia Card, ‘Review of Damaged Identities, Narrative Repair,’ *International Philosophical Quarterly* 42, no. 2 (2009), p 284.

¹³ Michael Bamberg, ‘Considering Counter Narratives,’ p 353.

function of these narratives in the policy process where they unite disparate actors around a common storyline or ‘mobilising metaphor’.¹⁴ In doing so they project conceptual coherence where there would otherwise be disorder.

Echoing this, and as with all heuristics, inevitably there a degree of crossover between the six storylines that I outline in Table 1 below. Explanations of institutional failure, for example, employ a variety of causal factors including patronage, or conflict between the cultural logics of modernism and traditionalism. This caveat aside, my aim is to strip back the veneer of coherence contained in the narratives ‘crisis’ and ‘persistence’ to demonstrate what is otherwise a disparate field. In doing so I highlight the different ways each storyline can be seen as both enabling and constraining democracy while also illustrating how mainstream approaches and theories are adapted in the Pacific. Consequently, while there is often a time lag between when debates emerge in the mainstream literature and the publication of Pacific case-studies, there is no reason to suggest that the democracy discussion, as represented in the Pacific context, is vastly different from other parts of the world.

¹⁴ David Mosse, ‘Is Good Policy Unimplementable? Reflections on the Ethnography of Aid Policy and Practice,’ p 663.

Table 1: Interpreting Democracy Narratives in the Pacific Islands

Explanatory Storyline	Crisis	Persistence
Culture	Culturally mandated forms of political authority, rank, and hierarchy are at odds with modernist principles and the European liberal tradition.	Hybrid or indigenised democratic institutions build on the strengths of existing mores as exemplified by constitutionally mandated chiefly councils and their equivalents.
State Strength / Fragmentation	Strong regional, island, clan, linguistic and family based identities and patronage undermine the authority of centralised state-based institutions and work against the formation and consolidation of political parties and a national consciousness.	The dispersion of power amongst a host of disparate, non-ideological or class-based political factions ensures that no one group can dominate or capture the institutions and machinery of government.
Scale	Tight social controls demand conformity and work against a pluralist expression of discontent. The threat of social ostracism marginalises political opposition, which in turn facilitates patriarchal authoritarianism and the personalisation of power.	Remoteness and smallness unifies communities around common challenges while the relatively reduced social proximity between leaders and those they govern provides for more direct citizen involvement, accountability and transparency.
Civil Society	Powerful leaders and ruling elites treat their countries as ‘fiefdoms’ by exercising control over nearly all aspects of political life, thus curtailing opposition, freedom of the press, and other forms of civic activism.	Elite excess and corruption is tempered by the strength of non-government institutions, including churches and trade unions (especially in Fiji), traditional leaders and culturally mandated forms of reciprocity, and the increasing vocality of NGOs with strong online links to overseas communities.
Institutions, Electoral Systems and Constitutions	Ill-designed institutional transfer leads to executive domination and legislative instability that undermines democratic processes leading to coups and constitutional crisis.	Extensive public consultations at independence about the form and function of institutional design and the relatively high reliance of small populations on the civil service for employment ensures the continuation of current institutions.

International
Intervention and
Foreign Aid

Geo-political manoeuvring, ill-conceived interventions, and foreign aid dependence perpetuates a handout mentality while the reliance of some economies (Solomon Islands, PNG) on resource extraction industries props up corrupt patronage-based regimes and fuels resource conflict (i.e. Bougainville).

The commitment of international agencies, bilateral donors and regional organisations to democratic government provides a check against authoritarian rule while foreign aid and technical assistance underpins the functioning of governing and regulatory institutions.

Culture

A belief that the values and principles of ‘modern’ state-based institutions are at odds with ‘traditional’ or ‘cultural’ forms of political authority is arguably the dominant rubric through which commentators and analysts have conceptualised the relationship between the state and society in the Pacific region since independence. Taking their cue from Samuel Huntington’s modernisation theory, existing cultural practices, particularly collective land tenure and culturally sanctioned forms of reciprocity, are presented as barriers to the realisation of individual rights and liberties.¹⁵ Consequently, this debate is less about whether prevailing ‘pre-modern’ dynamics affect contemporary politics – the assumption is that they do – and instead focuses on how they undermine liberal democratic processes, with notions of rank and hierarchy in particular singled out as obstacles to principles like ‘one-vote, one-value’. Writing after the 1987 coup, Fijian academic Asesela Ravuvu described democracy as a ‘façade’ a ‘parting whim of a colonial power that had itself only practised dictatorship’ while Peter Larmour’s work on institutional transfer highlights the power of the ‘foreign flower’ metaphor – unable to take root in South Pacific soil – as described by a *Fiji Times* editorial.¹⁶ These descriptions are particularly pertinent in Fiji, the one Pacific nation that has failed Huntington’s ‘two turnover test’ (concurrent changes of government signify democratic consolidation).¹⁷ Commentators refer to a prevailing ‘coup culture’¹⁸ whilst Melanesianists

¹⁵ Samuel. P Huntington, *Political Order in Changing Societies* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1968).

¹⁶ Asesela Ravuvu, *The Façade of Democracy: Fijian Struggles for Political Control, 1830-1987* (Suva: Reader Publishing House, 1991), p 87. Peter Larmour, “‘A Foreign Flower?’ Democracy in the South Pacific,” *Pacific Studies* 17, no. 1 (1994).

¹⁷ Samuel. P Huntington, *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991).

¹⁸ See Robbie Robertson, ‘Cooking the Goose: Fiji’s Coup Culture Contextualised,’ *The Round Table: The Commonwealth Journal of International Affairs* (2012); Jon Fraenkel, Stewart Firth, and Brij V. Lal (eds.), *The 2006 Military Takeover in Fiji: The Coup to End All Coups?* (Canberra: ANU E Press, 2009); Brij V Lal, *Another Way: The Politics of Constitutional Reform in Post-Coup Fiji* (Canberra, Australia: Asia Pacific Press, 1998); Scott MacWilliam, ‘Shallow Coups, Thin Democracy?’ *Journal of Pacific Studies* 5, no. 1 (2001).

commonly lament the insidious nature of ‘big man’ politics.¹⁹ The manipulation of culture is also regularly seen as a root cause of corruption by donors and international agencies like Transparency International in what Larmour calls a ‘gothic’ view.²⁰ For cultural relativists, practices ordinarily deemed corrupt (gifts, bribes) have different meanings according to context.

Recently, debate about the relationship between culture and politics has shifted somewhat with growing recognition that cultural practices can and do contribute to the maintenance of democratic institutions, and that hybrid arrangements are not always a perversion of either an ideal ‘modern’ or ‘traditional’ system. Writing about Samoa, Asofou So’o argues that Westminster traditions have not failed to take root in the Pacific but have instead been successfully adapted.²¹ He points to legally mandated *matai* [chiefly] candidacy as a positive example of introduced systems being blended with the best of the *fa’samoa* [Samoan way]. While not always ‘liberal’, he argues this has generated relative stability and prosperity. Others question the privileging of external measures of ‘success’ (think the version of liberal democracy contained in Freedom House rankings and World Bank governance indicators) over local beliefs and practices. Anthropologist Marshall Sahlins’ reflections on ‘Develop- Man’, for example, celebrates the persistence of culture in the face of modernisation while Epeli Hau’ofa’s vision of Oceanic empowerment extols political leaders like Vanuatu’s Father Walter Lini and Papua New Guinea’s Bernard Narokobi for promoting Melanesian

¹⁹ See Joseph Ketan, *The Name Must Not Go Down* (Suva, Fiji: Institute of Pacific Studies 2004); Abby McLeod, ‘Leadership Models in the Pacific,’ *State, Society and Governance in Melanesia Discussion Papers* 6(2008); Michael A. Rynkiewich and Roland Seib (eds.), *Politics in Papua New Guinea: Continuities, Changes and Challenges* (Goroka, Papua New Guinea: Melanesian Institute, 2000); Bill Standish, ‘The Dynamics of Papua New Guinea’s Democracy: An Essay,’ *Pacific Economic Bulletin* 22, no. 1 (2007); Jeffery Steeves, ‘Unbounded Politics in the Solomon Islands: Leadership and Party Alignments,’ *Pacific Studies* 19, no. 1 (1996).

²⁰ Peter Larmour, *Interpreting Corruption: Culture and Politics in the Pacific Islands* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2012).

²¹ Asofou So’o, ‘Westminster in Oceania: A Samoan Perspective,’ in John Henderson and Greg Watson (eds.), *Securing a Peaceful Pacific*, (Christchurch: University of Canterbury Press, 2005).

values as equal or better than their western equivalents.²² Rather than undermining democracy, in this view democratic institutions like parliament become indigenised with their form and function reflecting their history; both inherited and introduced. Furthermore, this perspective acknowledges that previous forms of political rule in the Pacific often contained processes that are now considered inherently democratic, with even the most stratified Pacific societies having traditions of equality between adult men speaking in village meetings; much like the famously democratic Greek city states.²³

State Strength / Fragmentation

In parallel with the end of the cold war, state-based institutions have been the dominant medium through which theorists and policy-makers have sought to strengthen formal government institutions in the Pacific region.²⁴ Largely functioning as an alternative to the emphasis on democracy discussed elsewhere in this article, Pippa Norris identifies three main strands in this debate: a sequential argument, first advocated by Huntington, that sees state capacity as a precursor to democratisation; the good governance argument, a leftist reaction to the structural adjustment reforms of the 1980's that considers the regulation of the political economy to be a necessary precondition of development (think leadership codes and oversight bodies); and a state capacity argument, synonymous with a Weberian view of the legitimate use of violence and the utility of an impartial and professional civil service.²⁵ By the late 1990s, and particularly after the September 11 attacks, state strengthening, especially

²² Marshall Sahlins, 'The Economics of Develop-Man in the Pacific,' *Anthropology and Aesthetics* 21, no. Spring (1992). Epeli Hau'ofa, 'Our Sea of Islands,' in Vijay Naidu, Eric Waddell, and Epeli Hau'ofa (eds.), *A New Oceania: Rediscovering Our Sea of Islands* (Suva: School of Social and Economic Development, University of the South Pacific, 1993), p 3.

²³ Peter Larmour, 'Democracy without Development in the South Pacific,' in Adrian Leftwich (ed.), *Democracy and Development: Theory and Practice* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1996), p 232.

²⁴ For the intellectual foundations of this view see Chalmers Johnson, *Miti and the Japanese Miracle* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1982); Douglas. C North, 'Institutions,' *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 5, no. 1 (1991); Theda Skocpol, 'Bringing the State Back In: Strategies and Analysis in Current Research,' in Peter Evans, Dietrich Rueschemeyer, and Theda Skocpol (ed.), *Bringing the State Back In*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985).

²⁵ Pippa Norris, *Making Democratic Governance Work: How Regimes Shape Prosperity, Welfare, and Peace* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

in relation to law and order had become a core plank in donor reform efforts, while democratic practice, characterized by personalisation and the persistence of cultural norms, was cast as the antithesis of these ideals.

Reflecting this concern, fragmentation both as it relates to fluid coalition groupings within parliament and separatist or breakaway movements outside of it, has increasingly been identified as a key factor undermining democratic legitimacy with institutional engineering (electoral systems and constitutions in particular), which I will discuss in greater detail below, partly designed to counter this trend.²⁶ In addition, the fluid nature of politics, often linked to the relative absence of strong political parties, has been of growing concern to academics, commentators and donors over recent decades. Contrary to popular opinion, the fractured nature of parliamentary coalitions is not exclusively a Melanesian phenomenon as Pacific countries, where parties have a limited impact and the executive sits in the legislature, often experience similar dynamics. The presidency of Nauru changed nine times during the 1990s while 2003 saw five presidents in one year.²⁷ Tuvalu had seven different governments between 1998 and 2006,²⁸ while strong two-party identification in Cook Islands is declining with floor crossing now more regular than it was during the governments of Sir Albert Henry and Sir Tom Davis. Likewise, since the 2010 Tongan elections, the most significant since recent democratic reforms, parliament has been subject to persistent speculation about side-switching and votes-of-no-confidence.²⁹ Consequently, if, as theorists since Schattschneider have argued, democracy is defined as the consolidation of party government, then democracy has failed in most Pacific countries where the foremost independence parties – *Pangu* in

²⁶ For review see Jon Fraenkel, 'Oceania's Political Institutions and Transitions,' in Stephen Levine (ed.) *Pacific Ways: Government and Politics in the Pacific Islands* (Wellington: Victoria University Press, 2009).

²⁷ John Connell, 'Nauru: The First Failed Pacific State?,' *The Round Table: The Commonwealth Journal of International Affairs* 95, no. 383 (2006).

²⁸ Paulson Panapa and Jon Fraenkel, "The Loneliness of the Pro-Government Backbencher and the Precariousness of Simple Majority Rule in Tuvalu," *State, Society and Governance in Melanesia Discussion Paper*, no. 2 (2008).

²⁹ Although so far a successful no-confidence motion has failed to materialise.

Papua New Guinea, *Vanua'aku* in Vanuatu, for example – are no longer capable of winning parliamentary majorities.³⁰

Echoing the culturalist arguments outlined above, fragmentation and the absence of strong nationalist movements is often considered a Melanesian phenomenon that mirrors the cultural and linguistic diversity of that region (around one quarter of the world's languages are spoken in Melanesia) and undermines the form and function of state-based rule. Separatist movements like the Bougainville conflict, *Papua Besena*, and *Nagriamel*, and ethnic tensions in Fiji and Solomon Islands, support this view; conflict in Bougainville and Solomon Islands in particular is also linked to the practices of resource extraction industries. However, this orthodoxy can be misleading. The United States administered Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands fragmented into distinct political entities (Palau, Marshall Islands and the Federated States of Micronesia) at independence. Similarly, the former British colony of the Gilbert and Ellice Islands split to become the sovereign nations of Kiribati and Tuvalu.

The fluid nature of political coalitions and the resulting manoeuvring and brinkmanship, critics claim, undermines the capacity of government to implement their reform agenda, with donor funded party strengthening programs justified under this rationalisation. The literature opposed to this prevailing view is relatively scarce. Echoing Robert Dahl's pluralism, and largely based on the PNG experience, Reilly argues that fragmentation, as opposed to a small number of entrenched factions, ensures that no one party or ethnic majority retains power; thus incentivising all actors to perpetuate a system that, sooner or later, will enable them to control the machinery of state.³¹ In contrast to the orthodox picture of state weakness, critics of Pacific elites have also argued that their relative strength, discussed further below, has

³⁰ Elmer Eric Schattschneider, *Party Government* (New York: Rinehart, 1942). Roland Rich, Luke Hambly, and Michael Morgan (eds.), *Political Parties in the Pacific Islands* (Canberra: ANU E Press, 2008).

³¹ Robert A. Dahl, *Pluralist Democracy in the United States: Conflict and Consent* (Chicago: Rand McNally, 1967). Ben Reilly, 'Ethnic Fragmentation, and Internal Conflict: Confused Theories, Faulty Data, and the "Crucial Case" of Papua New Guinea,' *International Security* 25, no. 3 (2001).

undermined the liberal project.³² However, unlike the persistence narrative found in the culturalist perspective, there has been no substantive attempt to draw on the strong tradition in political theory, which can be traced from Aristotle to Arendt and Habermas, which sees many of the characteristics common to politics in the Pacific (personalisation, the absence of parties and professional politicians, weak bureaucratic control) as ideal, and considers participation in public life, as opposed to the pursuit of material aspirations enshrined in the development enterprise, as the primary end of political action.

Scale

Size provides an obvious point of contrast between democracies in the Pacific and those in other parts of the world and yet, by and large, this variable is absent from the analysis of democracy and democratisation in the Pacific where personalisation in particular is seen to be an extension of existing cultural practice, despite its prevalence in other regions like the Caribbean. Conversely, scale is of great concern to some economists who see the isolation and relative dependence of small island states on aid and remittances as detrimental, and in extreme cases fatal, to development and by extension democracy.³³ Following Seymour Martin Lipset's thesis, proponents argue that democratisation is strongly correlated with industrialisation and the rise of an educated middle class.³⁴ Given the historical absence of these dynamics in the region, and the improbability of large-scale industrialisation occurring in the future, this perspective presumes that the Pacific would be relatively undemocratic. Adherents cite highly personalised patronage-based 'big man' politics – the term is also used

³² See Stephanie Lawson, *Tradition Versus Democracy in the South Pacific* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

³³ For discussion see Geoffrey Bertram and Ray Watters, 'The Mirab Economy and South Pacific Microstates,' *Pacific Viewpoint* 26, no. 3 (1985); Geoffrey Bertram, 'The Mirab Model Twelve Years On,' *Contemporary Pacific* 11, no. 1 (1999); Francis Hezel, *Pacific Island Nations: How Viable Are Their Economies?*, Pacific Islands Policy 7 (Honolulu: East-West Centre, 2012); Chakriya Bowman and Satish Chand, 'Size Matters: The Impact of Aid on Institutions,' *Pacific Economic Bulletin* 23, no. 2 (2008).

³⁴ Seymour Martin Lipset, 'Some Social Requisites of Democracy: Economic Development and Political Legitimacy,' *American Political Science Review* 53, no. 1 (1959).

in the Caribbean – electoral malpractice and fraud as examples of poor democratic performance. Elections and the regular rotation of leadership, adherents maintain, do not provide sufficient proof of democratisation, with the ideal pursuit of consensus masking the ugly reality of conformity and social ostracism that confronts discontented citizens in small communities.

The counter argument can be found in a number of diverse literatures. Political theorists have long argued that ‘small is beautiful’ when it comes to democratic politics as size limits the number of competing interests.³⁵ Largely, advocates of this perspective hark back to the writings of Plato and Aristotle and their belief that to maintain a stable *polis* the entire citizenry should be able to meet together in one place to discuss and debate matters of common concern.³⁶ Rather than an educated middle-class, democracy enabled humble men (but not women or slaves) of insignificant wealth and lineage to make their own laws; neither of these philosophers thought this radical form of government was optimal.³⁷ More recently, large comparative studies find a correlation between country size and democratisation, particularly in the Pacific and the Caribbean.³⁸

To explain this trend, Teresia Teaiwa wonders how Pacific Islanders can ‘hold grudges against people whom they cannot avoid, people they are bound to run into at the supermarket, the market or the street, people whom they are often bound by blood and history?’³⁹ From this perspective, the personalisation of politics reduces the distance between voter and

³⁵ For discussion see Godfrey Baldacchino, ‘Islands and Despots,’ *Commonwealth & Comparative Politics* 50, no. 1 (2012), p 106-08.

³⁶ Henry Srebrnik, ‘Small Island Nations and Democratic Values,’ *World Development* 32, no. 2 (2004), p 329; Godfrey Baldacchino, ‘Islands and Despots,’ p 106.

³⁷ John Keane, *The Life and Death of Democracy* (London, New York, Sydney and Toronto: Simon and Schuster, 2009), p 75.

³⁸ See Natasha Duncan and Dwayne Woods, ‘What About Us? The Anglo-Caribbean Democratic Experience,’ *Commonwealth and Comparative Politics* 45, no. 2 (2007); Dag Anckar, ‘Democracy as a Westminster Heritage,’ *Taiwan Journal of Democracy* 7, no. 1 (2011); Godfrey Baldacchino, ‘Islands and Despots’; Henry Srebrnik, ‘Small Island Nations and Democratic Values.’

³⁹ Teresia Teaiwa, “Ethnicity and Identity,” in John Henderson and Greg Watson (eds.) *Securing a Peaceful Pacific* (Christchurch: Canterbury University Press, 2005), p 271.

constituent while patronage and cronyism, rather than being symptomatic of democratic crisis, facilitate social integration, thus reinforcing common political dynamics. This view is echoed by Duncan and Woods who show, with reference to the Caribbean, that despite inequality, corruption and violence related to the international drug trade, democracy persists.⁴⁰ Indeed, Larmour goes further by arguing that if transnational circumstances (sovereign status and global market conditions) are held constant, then development poses the greatest risk to existing democracies in the Pacific by deepening social conflicts.⁴¹ He reasoned that democracies in PNG and Fiji were in most danger of crisis while countries with relatively smaller economies and little prospect of development are likely to persevere. Conversely, despite representing the most extreme example of the ‘resource curse’ or ‘Dutch disease’, Nauru has not suffered from violent conflict, although John Connell maintains that it is perhaps the Pacific’s first truly ‘failed’ state.⁴²

Civil Society

The apparent weakness of civil society actors in the Pacific has been of great concern to democracy promoters.⁴³ Drawn from Amartya Sen’s entitlement theory, although it has deeper roots in the basic needs approaches of the 1970s, this perspective sees an active citizenry as a key building block of democratic consolidation.⁴⁴ Unrestrained elite excess is a key concern for Ron Crocombe who claims that many of the region’s politicians have treated their countries as personal ‘fiefdoms’ due to their extensive influence over nearly all aspects of social, economic and political life.⁴⁵ His documentation of nepotism under Sir Albert

⁴⁰ Natasha Duncan and Dwayne Woods, ‘What About Us? The Anglo-Caribbean Democratic Experience.’

⁴¹ Peter Larmour, ‘Democracy without Development in the South Pacific,’ p 245.

⁴² John Connell, ‘Nauru: The First Failed Pacific State?’

⁴³ For review see Nicole Haley, ‘Strengthening Civil Society to Build Demand for Better Governance in the Pacific: Literature Review and Analysis of Good Practice and Lessons Learned,’ *State, Society and Governance in Melanesia Discussion Paper*, no. 7 (2008).

⁴⁴ Amartya Sen, *Development as Freedom* (New York: Anchor Books, 1999).

⁴⁵ Ron Crocombe, *The South Pacific*, 7th ed. (Suva, Fiji: IPS Publications, University of the South Pacific, 2008), p 643.

Henry's government in Cook Islands provides a picture of public life co-opted by one family. Veteran Pacific reporter Michael Field echoes this sentiment and cites his willingness to criticise political figures as the overriding rationale behind his successive banning from several Pacific Island countries.⁴⁶ His colleague, Tonga's Kalafi Moala, was imprisoned for his editorship of the newspaper *Taimi 'o Tonga* which ran stories that were critical of the ruling monarchy.⁴⁷ The gendered nature of parliamentary decision-making in the region has also attracted recent focus amongst civil society organisations. From this standpoint, democratic transparency and representativeness is undermined by the control of the predominantly male elite over countervailing forces, including the media.

Alternatively, Jon Fraenkel argues that most 'Pacific countries have a relatively free press, more or less independent judiciaries and, despite some glaring irregularities, few examples of overtly rigged elections'.⁴⁸ In this view, rather than being deliberately crushed, the emergence of a strong civil society has historically suffered from problems associated with relative size, with print and radio media often requiring government subsidies. More recently, the internet provides new forums for political engagement, especially amongst young urban elites and diaspora communities, with numerous Facebook groups and blogs sharing news and information about political events and policy issues.⁴⁹ In examining the forty year history of women's organising in Fiji, Nicole George finds that active citizenship both reflects and

⁴⁶ Michael Field, *Swimming with Sharks: Tales from the Pacific Frontline* (New Zealand: Penguin Group, 2010), p 10.

⁴⁷ Kalafi Moala, *Island Kingdom Strikes Back: The Story of an Independent Island Newspaper - Taimi O Tonga* (Auckland: Pacmedia Publishers Ltd., 2002). For further discussion of the role of the media in Pacific politics see David Robie (ed.), *Nius Bilong Pasifik: Mass Media in the Pacific* (Port Moresby: Papua New Guinea Press, 1995); Taberannang Korauaba. 'Small Pacific States and Media Freedom: A Kiribati Case Study.' *Pacific Journalism Review* 13, no. 1 (2007).

⁴⁸ Jon Fraenkel, 'Democracy and Its Discontents,' in John Henderson and Greg Watson (eds.), *Securing a Peaceful Pacific* (Christchurch: Canterbury University Press, 2005), p 263.

⁴⁹ For discussion see Sarah Logan, 'Rausim! Digital Politics in Papua New Guinea,' *State, Society and Governance in Melanesia Discussion Paper* 9 (2012); Danielle Cave, "Digital Islands: How the Pacific's ICT Revolution Is Transforming the Region," *Lowy Institute for International Policy* (2012); Francis Herman, 'The Pacific Right to Know in the Digital Age,' *Pacific Journalism Review* 16, no. 2 (2010).

contests global and locally contingent factors.⁵⁰ In Vanuatu, politician Ralph Regenvanu has generated enormous support for his anti-corruption campaign, which has a strong online social network presence amongst young urban constituents.⁵¹ His party platform blends globalised discourses like good governance and transparency with localised concerns about land and custom.

Invariably absent from the avowedly secular concern with governance is recognition that, outside of family and kinship networks, churches and religious organisations are amongst the strongest non-government actors in the Pacific region. As above, in some instances churches are implicated as an extension of the ruling elite. Brij Lal, for example, cites the influence of the Fijian Methodist Church on violence post the 1987 coup.⁵² The imposition of a Sunday Observance Decree, Lal argues, in a country where half the population was non-Christian, encouraged intolerance among more militant fundamentalist Christians some of whom were responsible for burning down and desecrating Hindu, Muslim and Sikh religious sites in October 1989. Conversely, churches can provide an avenue for the expression of dissent. Bishop Patelesio Finau was a key figure in Tonga's pro-democracy movement whilst former Papua New Guinean minister and later anti-corruption campaigner, Sir Anthony Siaguru, used his newspaper column to urge churches to speak out from the pulpit against the abuse of power.⁵³ A similar tension can be found in discussions about the role of traditional leadership curbing elite excess. Culturalist explanations tend to view grandiose forms of conspicuous consumption as an extension of previous cultural practice. Conversely, Barrie Macdonald finds that public displays of wealth and affluence by western educated elites are curtailed in

⁵⁰ Nicole George, "Situating" Active Citizenship: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives of Women's Organising in the Pacific,' *Development in Practice* 19, no. 8 (2009), p 981.

⁵¹ see Siobhan McDonnell, 'Social Media Smokescreen?,' ANU, <http://asiapacific.anu.edu.au/news/story/social-media-smokescreen>.

⁵² Brij V. Lal, *Broken Waves: A History of the Fiji Islands in the Twentieth Century*, Pacific Monograph Series (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1992), p 317.

⁵³ Anthony Siaguru, *In-House in Papua New Guinea with Anthony Siaguru* (Canberra Asia Pacific Press, 2001), p 326.

Kiribati by cultural norms and values, whilst Narokobi's writings emphasise the redistributive aspects of Melanesian leadership as a counterpoint to what he sees as the bastardisation of these values by contemporary politicians.⁵⁴

Institutions, Electoral Systems and Constitutions

After culture, some of the most intense discussion about democracy in the Pacific has revolved around institutional architecture. As outlined above, predominantly this view of democratic crisis sees the problem in terms of ill-considered institutional transfer and design – particularly the idiosyncrasies of a Westminster system – by drawing on a number of different theories to problematize and then solve persistent instability, coups and coercion. Concerned with the practice of politics, numerous island governments have initiated constitutional reviews. In Fiji, Arend Lijphart's goal of 'consociational' democracy informed discussion about the 1997 constitution whilst in Papua New Guinea the shift from First-Past-the-Post to Limited Preferential Voting was made in a belief that it would temper the hyper-fractionalisation that many observers felt drove violence around elections.⁵⁵ This view, often combined with an emphasis on electoral integrity, is also popular with donors concerned with building capacity amongst regional electoral commissions. The use of legislative instruments in particular to engineer stronger political parties is also a feature of this debate. PNG's Organic Law on the Integrity of Political Parties and Candidates is the most prominent attempt to engineer stability in the region,⁵⁶ although anti-party hopping laws have also

⁵⁴ Barrie MacDonald, 'Governance and Political Process in Kiribati,' *Economic Division Working Papers* no. 2 (1996). Bernard Narokobi, *The Melanesian Way: Total Cosmic Vision of Life* (Port Moresby: Institute of Papua New Guinea Studies, 1980); Bernard Narokobi, *Life and Leadership in Melanesia* (Port Moresby: Institute of Papua New Guinea Studies, 1983).

⁵⁵ Arend Lijphart, *Democracy in Plural Societies: A Comparative Exploration* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1977). Ben Reilly, 'Political Reform in Papua New Guinea: Testing the Evidence,' *Pacific Economic Bulletin* 21, no. 1 (2006).

⁵⁶ For discussion see Jon Fraenkel, 'The Dangers of Political Party Strengthening Legislation in Solomon Islands,' *Pacific Economic Bulletin* 23, no. 3 (2008); Edward Wolfers et al. (eds.), *The Quest for Integrity of Political Parties and Governance in Papua New Guinea: Law, Experience, and Issues* (Port Moresby, Papua New Guinea: Integrity of Political Parties and Candidates Commission, 2011).

recently been passed in Samoa, where the Human Rights Protection Party has been in power for more than 30 years, and Cooks Islands.

A variety of arguments are put forward to counter this image of crisis. Constitutional architects and independence leaders often defend the extensive consultations that led to current institutional arrangements by citing their ‘home-grown’ nature, including provisions for traditional leaders and preference for accommodating existing political dynamics.⁵⁷ In Niue, despite some members from the fourteen representative seats now having only a handful of voters, key architects of the constitution remain committed to the principles they sought to enshrine at self-government. Institutional features, including Presidential term-limits, a cap on ministerial portfolios and a stipulation that successful vote-of-no confidence trigger the dissolution of parliament, are believed to have contributed to the relative stability of parliamentary politics in Kiribati. Conversely, despite Presidents in FSM and Palau being relatively insulated from legislative revolt and no-confidence motions, these countries experience similar practical dynamics to their Westminster equivalents, leading Fraenkel to question whether institutional engineering can really make the difference that its advocates proclaim.⁵⁸

Finally, while the crisis view of economic conditions common in many Pacific Island countries opposes democratisation in Lipset’s thesis, it can also be seen to underlie the persistence of democratic regimes.⁵⁹ The Government accounts for more than a third of total employment and 60-65 percent of gross national product in Palau,⁶⁰ and while this represents

⁵⁷ For discussion see Peter Larmour, *Foreign Flowers: Institutional Transfer and Good Governance in the Pacific Islands* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2005), p 15-17.

⁵⁸ Jon Fraenkel, ‘Democracy and Its Discontents.’; Jon Fraenkel, ‘Political Consequences of Pacific Island Electoral Laws,’ in Roland Rich, Luke Hambly, and Michael Morgan (eds.), *Political Parties in the Pacific Islands*, (Canberra: ANU E Press, 2008).

⁵⁹ Seymour Martin Lipset, ‘Some Social Requisites of Democracy: Economic Development and Political Legitimacy.’

⁶⁰ Asian Development Bank, <http://www.adb.org/news/adb-help-palau-move-toward-self-reliance> (accessed 12/12/2012)

a barrier to neo-liberal development it also means that most families have a personal stake in the persistence of governing institutions and an active interest in the day-to-day political functions and practices.⁶¹

International Intervention and Foreign Aid

Foreign intervention in Pacific Island affairs began well before the colonial period and each discipline privileges particular analytic frameworks to interpret how past events influence contemporary politics. Historians, for example, use the phrase ‘fatal impact’ whilst anthropologists often lament the march of modernism and the destruction of cultural heritage and language. ‘New Interventionism’ is the term used by international relations scholars to describe Australia’s 21st century role in the Pacific.⁶² Intervention as a form of crisis also features in neo-Marxist accounts of development assistance in the region, with dependency theorists in particular critical of the way that aid perpetuates the reliance of islanders and island governments on global market forces.⁶³ At the opposite end of the ideological spectrum, neo-liberals argue that the negative effect of aid – protectionism impedes economic growth – undermines development. As an alternative, they advocate scaling down assistance in favour of free market mechanisms: a non-intervention, intervention.⁶⁴

Concern with the nature of international interventions is also a feature of the literature on China in the Pacific, the most prominent example of which is Crocombe’s *Asia in the Pacific*

⁶¹ For discussion see Satish Chand, ‘The Public Sector and Development in the Pacific Islands,’ *Pacific Economic Bulletin* 14, no. 1 (1999).

⁶² Greg Fry and Tarcisius Kabutaulaka (eds.), *Intervention and State-Building in the Pacific* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2008); Terence Wesley-Smith, ‘Self-Determination in Oceania,’ *Race and Class* 48, no. 29 (2007).

⁶³ For discussion see Stewart Firth, ‘The Pacific Islands and the Globalization Agenda,’ *The Contemporary Pacific* 12, no. 1 (2000); Antony Hooper et al. (eds.), *Class and Culture in the Pacific* (Institute of Pacific Studies of the University of the South Pacific and Centre for Pacific Studies of the University of Auckland, 1987).

⁶⁴ For discussion see Jonathan Gouy, ‘Aid, Dutch Disease, and the Pacific,’ in Ron Duncan (ed.) *The Political Economy of Economic Reform in the Pacific*, (Mandaluyong City, Philippines: Asian Development Bank, 2011); Helen Hughes, ‘Aid Has Failed the Pacific,’ *Issue Analysis*, no. 33 (2003); Chakriya Bowman and Satish Chand, ‘Size Matters: The Impact of Aid on Institutions.’

Islands: Replacing the West.⁶⁵ In Solomon Islands, commentators and donors have been critical of the government of Taiwan for providing discretionary funding to MPs on the basis that it intensifies patronage-based politics.⁶⁶ Triggered by the election of Snyder Rini as Prime Minister, one commonly cited cause of the April 2006 riots in Honiara's Chinatown, was frustration with the hidden hand of Asian-backed 'money politics'.⁶⁷ Similarly, scholars of PNG and Solomon Islands in particular have been critical of resource extraction industries and the corruption they can engender.⁶⁸

Intervention is also commonly cited by scholars and commentators as a reason for democratic persistence. As above, independence shaped the types of institutional architecture apparent in the contemporary Pacific but current donor funded scholarship schemes are a carryover from colonial practice. The aim in both instances is to inculcate emerging elites in the values of democratic government.⁶⁹ A similar point can be made about free association arrangements and labour mobility laws which, along with providing important remittances, also serve as a channel for political opinions. Sir Albert Henry and Sir Tom Davis pioneered 'flying voters'

⁶⁵ Ron Crocombe, *Asia in the Pacific Islands : Replacing the West* (Suva, Fiji: IPS Publications, University of the South Pacific, 2007).

⁶⁶ See Jon Fraenkel, 'The Atrophied State: A Supply-Side Perspective on Politician "Slush Funds" in Western Melanesia,' in Ron Duncan (ed.) *The Political Economy of Economic Reform in the Pacific* (Mandaluyong City, Philippines: Asian Development Bank, 2011).

⁶⁷ Sinclair Dinnen, 'Dilemmas of Intervention and the Building of State and Nation,' in Sinclair Dinnen and Stewart Firth (eds.) *Politics and State Building in Solomon Islands* (Canberra: ANU E Press, 2008), 18; For regional commentary see Robert Keith-Reid. and Samisoni Pareti, 'Stirring a Pacific Wok,' (Islands Buisnes, March 2006), p 16; Matthew Allen, 'Politics of Disorder: The Social Unrest in Honiara,' in Sinclair Dinnen and Stewart Firth (eds.) *Politics and State Building in Solomon Islands* (Canberra: Asia Pacific Press, 2008), p 42; Jon Fraenkel, 'The Impact of Ramsi on the 2006 Elections,' in Sinclair Dinnen and Stewart Firth (eds.) *Politics and State Building in Solomon Islands* (Canberra: Asia Pacific Press, 2008), p 177.

⁶⁸ For discussion see Tarcisius Kabutaulaka, 'Deforestation Reform in Solomon Islands,' in Peter Larmour (ed.) *Governance and Reform in the South Pacific* (Canberra: National Centre for Development Studies, 1998); Judith Bennett, 'Roots of Conflict in Solomon Islands Though Much Is Taken, Much Abides: Legacies of Tradition and Colonialism,' *State, Society and Governance in Melanesia Discussion Paper*, no. 5 (2002); Colin Filer and Benedict Imbun, 'A Short History of Mineral Development Policies in Papua New Guinea, 1972-2002,' in Ron May (ed.) *Policy Making and Implementation: Studies from Papua New Guinea* (Canberra: ANU E Press, 2009); Matthew Allen, 'The Political Economy of Logging in Solomon Islands,' in Ron Duncan (ed.), *The Political Economy of Economic Reform in the Pacific* (Mandaluyong City, Philippines: Asian Development Bank, 2011).

⁶⁹ See Dag Anckar, 'Democracy as a Westminster Heritage.'

from New Zealand to Cook Islands in the 1970s but campaigning in overseas communities is common throughout Micronesia and Polynesia today.

Strong pressure from the international community around values and practices associated with democratic government can also help explain democratic persistence. Organisations like the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association, The Inter-Parliamentary Union, the Centre for Democratic Institutions [AusAID] and the Institute for Democratic Electoral Assistance (better known as IDEA), for example, provide training for MPs and parliamentary staff, leadership dialogues and other forums where democratic processes are discussed. Avinash Kumar finds that the impact of the international community has been an important factor in the persistence of legislature in Fiji, despite several coups, while RAMSI was ostensibly mobilised to secure the rule of law and parliamentary democracy.⁷⁰ Finally, economists note that despite problems of size, small island states represent an ‘empirical anomaly’ with higher than average standards of living – derived from skilfully managing the globalization process to generate aid and remittances⁷¹ – which should, according to Lipset, provide a democracy dividend.⁷²

Conclusion

Master narratives invariably create counter-narratives just as all policy solutions necessarily create the problematisations they seek to address. Even a development goal like ‘good’ governance with its seemingly irrefutable positive connotations – nobody champions ‘bad’ governance – has its critics who either argue that endogenous values are hegemonic, that the

⁷⁰ Avinash Kumar, ‘The Resilience of the Legislature in Fiji’ (Ph. D. thesis, Australian National University, 2012). See also Derek McDougall, ‘Intervention in Solomon Islands,’ *The Round Table: The Commonwealth Journal of International Affairs* 93, no. 374 (2004); Matthew Allen and Sinclair Dinnen, ‘The North Down Under: Antinomies of Conflict and Intervention in Solomon Islands,’ *Conflict, Security & Development* 10, no. 3 (2010).

⁷¹ Geoffrey Bertram, ‘The Mirab Model Twelve Years On,’ 107.

⁷² Seymour Martin Lipset, ‘Some Social Requisites of Democracy: Economic Development and Political Legitimacy.’

targets of such reforms are in fact not as ‘bad’ as they are made out to be, or that proselytising ‘good governance’ professionals resemble colonial era missionaries.

In this article I have highlighted how ‘crisis’ and ‘persistence’ are co-dependent narratives employed to describe democracy in the Pacific Islands. In doing so I have described six explanatory storylines – culture; state strength / fragmentation; size; civil society; institutions, electoral systems and constitutions; and international intervention and foreign aid – and illustrated how they interact temporally and spatially. I have demonstrated that while some narratives appear to have greater explanatory power in certain contexts – culture in Samoa, institutions in Kiribati, ostracism in pre-reform Tonga, Crocombe’s ‘fiefdoms’ in the 1980s/1990s – we nevertheless commonly draw on multiple storylines to analyse the experiences of individual countries and certain eras, including holding seemingly contradictory views in tension. For example, despite stemming from opposed rationales, AusAID simultaneously funds programs that seek to strengthen political parties with the aim of reducing persistent political instability, whilst also supporting civil society actors who view executive domination as the root cause of democratic crisis.⁷³ A similar tension is apparent in calls to strengthen institutions and tackle corruption by neo-liberals who concurrently argue for reduced international intervention and a lean and flexible civil service.

In highlighting how different explanatory storylines seek to understand democracy in the Pacific region I have advanced a counter-narrative that privileges a messy and contingent world of ‘narratives-in-interaction’. Consequently, while Table 1, for clarity sake, seeks to provide a sense of conceptual order, policy-making is rarely this coherent but rather appears, as Michael Bamberg argues, ‘improvised’ and ‘open to interpretation’ with actors employing multiple narratives that embody their lived experiences.⁷⁴ Indeed, if anything, this conceptual

⁷³ AusAID, *Pacific 2020* (Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia, 2006).

⁷⁴ Michael Bamberg, ‘Considering Counter Narratives,’ p 357.

discussion points to the urgent need for more work that analyses when and how policy actors employ these storylines in both official and everyday language. The goal of narrative analysis in this context is to describe how narratives interact and explain why their plausibility fluctuates. In turn, this would provide a better sense of when and how different actors unite around a common metaphor and shared repertoire to legitimise and sustain policy interventions. In doing so we are able to strip back the veneer of conceptual coherence and better understand the taken-for-granted assumptions that inform governing practices.