



## Applying the ‘Uncomfortable Science’<sup>1</sup>: the Role of Anthropology in Development

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### Abstract

This essay will evaluate the potential of anthropological contributions to international development. I hope that by tracing applied anthropology to its colonial roots, examining the inherent contradictions of applying anthropology to development issues, and anticipating what the future holds for both disciplines I will demonstrate that, despite significant obstacles, anthropology does have a significant role to play in development.

### Keywords

Development, applied anthropology, colonialism

*“One recalls the not altogether unfair stereotype of an anthropologist living in a village for years and emerging at the end with the view that the villagers are all splendid chaps who ought to be allowed to get on with agriculture in their own way, regardless of the fact that the world around them will not allow them to do so.” (Simmonds, cited in Nolan 2002)*

Development is undoubtedly the key challenge of our time. With two thirds of the world’s population struggling to survive on fewer than two dollars a day (Nolan 2002:30), it is literally “a matter of life and death” (Edelman and Haugerud 2005:1). Huge sums have been invested in development projects in the post-war period, yet the vast majority of these projects have been viewed as “unremitting” failures (Ferguson 1990:8). The poor success rate of development initiatives has been attributed to a lack of awareness of the social and cultural implications inherent to planned change: “As fifty years of development experience has shown, development efforts that fit with their surroundings will work, whereas those that disregard salient aspects of context will usually fail, sooner or later.” (Nolan 2002:25)

Nolan and many others would argue that development is therefore a natural arena for the social anthropologist, that we are “uniquely placed to further understanding of poverty” (Sillitoe 2007:154). It may well be true that anthropology “offers powerful analytical tools for integrating culture, power, history, and economy into one analytical framework” (Edelman and Haugerud 2005:20). However, the involvement of anthropologists in development is nothing if not problematic. A history tainted by colonialism, a reputation as the “flies in the ointment” (ibid: 46) of development, and a general disregard for the application of

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<sup>1</sup> Firth 1981:198



anthropology among academics have all served to relegate anthropology to a minor role in the development process. Furthermore, a “crisis of representation” (Clammer 2000:1) between the interests of donor agencies and those of recipient communities has led many development anthropologists to question the moral implications of their involvement.

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### **The history of applied anthropology**

*“Applied anthropology is an occupation for the half-baked.” (Mair, quoted in Gardner and Lewis 1996:35)*

There is considerable disagreement over the origins of applied anthropology. That it burgeoned and flourished during the colonial era, however, cannot be denied. Indeed, it was the intention of several prominent early anthropologists that ‘practical’ anthropology, as Malinowski called it, be used to improve the efficiency of the colonial administration (Grillo 1985:11). Even Nolan, the staunch defender of applied anthropology, concedes that “anthropology served European expansion well, as the history of the discipline clearly shows.” (Nolan 2002:65)

One of the “best-known early advocates” (Gardner and Lewis 1996:31) of the use of applied anthropology to facilitate the process of colonial rule was Radcliffe-Brown. His ‘School of African Studies’ at the University of Capetown, developed in an effort to reduce conflict between the white and black populations, paved the way for an increased anthropological presence in the British colonial system (ibid:32). However, “the question of a practical role for anthropology provoked considerable controversy among anthropologists ... [who] tended to view local, non-Western culture as something to be preserved, almost at all costs, against the ravages of colonialism.” (ibid:31) It was this same sentiment that led to criticism of American anthropologists, among them Margaret Mead and Ruth Benedict, whose ethnographies of Japanese Americans during the Second World War were used to great effect by the United States government in their efforts against Japan.

Yet for all their discomfort with the colonial label, many anthropologists were in no hurry to vindicate themselves with the dawn of the development era. On the contrary, some of the earliest proponents of modernisation theory were anthropologists. They figured prominently in the early editions of *Economic Development and Culture Change*, a journal that emerged in the 1950s as a forum for debate on economic development in poor countries. Furthermore, as Little and Painter demonstrate, anthropologists played a role in “articulating modernization theory as something that could be implemented as policy... In most cases, anthropologists stated their recommendations in neutral, technocratic language that portrayed as scientific



fact assertions that the living conditions of the poor in Latin America, Africa and Asia would improve through processes of modernization” (1995:604).

Despite anthropology’s prominent role in development in the 1950s, application was still seen as a “stepchild” to academia (Nolan 2002:67). This was due in part to the exploitation of anthropological expertise by Western governments: American anthropologists, for example, had been recruited during the Second World War to assist in the forced relocation of Japanese Americans or to subdue occupied peoples in the Pacific (Gardner and Lewis 1996). Moral objections aside, modernisation theory in the 1950s proposed “a far-reaching and fundamental transformation of society from ‘traditional’ forms which constrain economic growth to ‘modern’ forms which promote it and which resemble our own.” (Hoben 1982:352). This aim was the antithesis of the “anthropological commitment to the preservation or at least protection of diverse indigenous beliefs, values, and practices” (ibid:367). As Belshaw points out, anthropologists are often characterised by “a detachment from, a disenchantment with, and a critique of their own societies” (cited in Robertson, 1984:293). It seems unlikely that a society that left them ‘disenchanted’ would be one that they would want to replicate elsewhere.

The split between academic and applied anthropology paved the way for what was eventually assumed to be a fundamental distinction between ‘development anthropology’ and the ‘anthropology of development’ (Edelman and Haugerud 2005:40). When anthropologists, buoyed by the moral righteousness of dependency theory, began to reassert themselves in development from the 1970s onwards, it was the development anthropologists who sought work in donor agencies such as the World Bank. Anthropologists of development, on the other hand, were characterised more by a “radical critique of, and distancing from, the development establishment” (Escobar 1997:498). The distinction has recently been reconsidered and deemed to be problematic (ibid), not least because it “obscures the inextricability of both types of knowledge, thus encouraging practitioners to view everything not written in report form as ‘irrelevant’ and researchers to ignore the practical implications of their findings.” (Gardner and Lewis 1996:50).

### **Anthropologists in the development industry**

*“While anthropologists are trained to be cultural relativists, development agencies are usually committed to universal principles of progress.” (Gardner and Lewis 1996:77)*

It was not until the late 1970s that the dominant institutions began to accept the need for a social element to their projects. The introduction of social soundness guidelines by USAID (Hoben 1982:358) seemed to provide a niche for social anthropologists. However, although the number of people with graduate degrees in anthropology working for USAID increased steadily to around seventy-five in the mid-nineties (Little and Painter 1995:603) very few were in roles that specifically required anthropological experience.

There are several reasons for the rather cool relationship that still exists to a certain extent between anthropologists and practitioners. Ironically, it has been argued that the divide is largely cultural (Nolan 2002). While anthropologists think it necessary to spend long periods of time in the field, policymakers



work to tight deadlines. Furthermore, when the results of the anthropological evaluation do finally come in, they are considered meaningless and irrelevant to the task at hand: “We have to avoid the label of peddlers in useless information or exotica.” (Sillitoe 2007:157)

Anthropologists, for their part, face difficult questions when they become involved in development projects. The need to develop communities at all is very often counter-intuitive: “We face the uncomfortable proposition that applied anthropology is using people’s knowledge to advance development when we consider their cultures already well-developed in their own way.” (Sillitoe 2007:157) More pertinent is the question of the use or misuse of information provided. “Many anthropologists fear that their work may inadvertently harm the people they wish to protect, perhaps by bringing them to the attention of officialdom or predatory economic and political forces.” (Robertson 1984:296).

The fine balance between protecting a community’s interests and satisfying a client’s requirements is often difficult to achieve: “If we cannot persuade them, then we either fall in line or get out” (Nolan 2002:85). It is easy and no doubt very common for anthropologists to “compromise their skills and interests” in order to fall in line with donor policy (Redclift 1985:199). However, Cerneau does not agree that applied development in an institutional setting needs to be inherently compromising: “I didn’t see...the position of the anthropologist as one in which you must accept what you are told and simply help to execute it.” (Cerneau 2007:345)

Finally, the reality of working for development institutions can become highly objectionable to the sensibilities of the anthropologist. Despite their apparently favourable stance on social issues, donor agencies still see economic progress as the real benchmark for development. It is perhaps for this reason that there is “a tendency to bring in the anthropologists only when things begin to go wrong, rather than having them involved from the start.” (Gardner and Lewis 1996:46). Many commentators including Nolan and Sillitoe, argue that anthropologists should be involved in every stage of a project, from planning to conclusion. This would at the very least allow for the participation of local people in processes that are intended to transform their lives (Chambers), and would steer development away from the frankly abhorrent social engineering of the past.

### **Opposition to development anthropology**

*“I consider ‘development anthropology’ a kind of neo-colonialism.” (Leach 1982:50)*

The involvement of anthropology in development is not universally popular. There is even some continuing doubt over whether or not it actually has a role to play. It is indeed disconcerting that “although anthropology has been involved with international development for decades, the discipline has yet to have a determinant influence on how development is done” (Nolan 2002: preface). Gardner and Lewis agree: “It is extremely difficult to identify specifically what it is, in practical terms, that professional anthropologists do have to offer development” (1996:130). The anthropological obsession with the specific as against the



general has been a source of consternation: “the insistence that each little world should be evaluated on its own terms has created awkward disjunctures, and made comparison very difficult.” (Robertson 1984:298).

Many critics of development anthropology find their grievance not in anthropology but in what they call the development ‘discourse’ (Escobar 1995). These writers base their argument on Foucault’s groundbreaking text ‘The Order of Things’ (1970), in which he reveals that discourses of power, while presented as objective and natural, construct their subjects in particular ways and exercise power over them. Knowledge is therefore inherently political (Gardner and Lewis 1996). Escobar applies this principle to development, claiming that the development discourse is merely a way for donor agencies in the West to impose and maintain power over developing nations. He goes as far as to say that development anthropologists working within the context of development inevitably perpetuate and reproduce its doctrine, and criticises them for not questioning the true nature of that doctrine: “How unanthropological, one might say, to accept an entire historically produced cultural field without probing its depths.” (Escobar 1991:661)

Those opposed to development anthropology are also quick to point out that anthropological research isn’t nearly as objective and scientific as it was originally thought to be. Classical anthropologists such as Malinowski went to great lengths to assert the validity of their subject as a scientific discipline, although later figures including Evans-Pritchard would have disagreed. It is generally accepted now that anthropologists do not arrive in communities as a blank sheet, ready to absorb the local culture, but do in fact carry preconceptions and biases. With this in mind, I must admit to being rather shocked by Nolan’s assertion that anthropologists carry ‘few preconceptions’ about the subjects of their research (2002). I find this remark at best highly optimistic, and would be more inclined to agree with Escobar: “In their studies, and in spite of themselves, development anthropologists impose upon local realities social and political analyses that have travelled well-known terrains ... not merely neutral frameworks through which ‘local knowledge’ innocently shows itself.” (1991:659). Even ethnography, seen by many as anthropology’s greatest asset, has difficulty shaking its colonial origins: “Ethnography is not neutral but unavoidably tied into historically shaped webs of meanings and power.” (Rossi 2004:557)

### **The benefits of an anthropological perspective**

*An anthropological training gives the analytical means to understand the heterogeneity of local actors and their interests, to see the multiple links in their social lives and appreciate their everyday strategies, to tap into local understandings and comprehend resistance to perceived outside interference. (Sillitoe 2007:154).*

In the face of a compromised past and a constricted present, can anthropology hope to have any positive effect on development in the future? The majority of commentators believe it can. Gardner and Lewis, for example, argue for an anthropological overhaul of development from within and without: “anthropology can contribute to more positive forms of developmental thought and practice, both by working in development and also by providing a critical account of development” (1996:25). In particular, they reject the simplistic binary oppositions that permeate development discourse: “anthropological insights can provide a dynamic critique of development and help push thought and practice away from oversystemic models and dualities





(traditional as opposed to modern; formal as opposed to informal; developed versus undeveloped) and in more creative directions” (ibid:2).

Sillitoe (2007) points to anthropology’s potential as a force for creating a multidisciplinary approach to development issues. “Anthropologists are well-equipped to negotiate not only cultural boundaries, but also disciplinary ones,” (2007:151) he argues, adding that “we have to consider changing ways of doing anthropology in view of its changing role in an emerging era of ‘transdisciplinarity’” (ibid:150). He also sees a role for anthropologists in raising awareness of what he terms ‘indigenous knowledge systems’ (IKS). Although Sillitoe emphasises what he considers to be the benefits of incorporating indigenous knowledge into development practice, Clammer dismisses IKS as one of development anthropology’s “contortions” in order to be “needed”, to “(re)establish its credentials” (2000:1). Escobar likewise criticises the anthropologists’ tendency “to foster the impression that they have a monopoly on such contributions” (1991:671).

There is no doubt that, even if anthropology does have a contribution to make, the above suggestions are only practicable within the context of the development paradigm. As a result, issues such as the ethical use of anthropological research, the “extent to which the mindset and actions of development anthropologists are shaped or constrained by the fact that they have to operate within the scope of mainstream development institutions” (Escobar 1991:666), and the abandonment of traditional methodologies in favour of less rigorous studies are not resolved, merely avoided. The truth is that for an anthropologist, working from within the development discourse will always be inherently compromising. Whether it is therefore impossible to make any sort of contribution is an issue that I hope to resolve in the final subsection of this essay.

### **Should anthropology get involved?**

“Is it better that anthropologists get involved in development on the wrong side, for the wrong people, for the wrong reasons, than that they stay motionless on the touchline?” Redclift 1985:200)

It has been argued, very persuasively, by some commentators that anthropology should play no part in development. Many call instead for a post-development era in which the preconceptions and generalisations of the discourse are abandoned in favour of localised, community-specific initiatives (Escobar 1991). These ideas, while laudable, are somewhat optimistic at present. We must not forget that the development industry wields vast fortunes and is potentially capable of reinventing itself ad-indefinitum in an effort to stay on top.

Given that this is the current state of affairs, it is tempting to advocate that anthropology withdraw from development altogether. This approach may ostensibly appear to avoid furthering “the loss of cultural integrity” (Bennett 1988:2) of development recipients. However, I feel that anthropologists cannot escape involvement in development, whether they consciously avoid it or not.

Grillo (1985:17) argues that anthropologists who were active in the colonial era were inevitably part of the colonial system, whether directly involved in administration or fiercely opposed to it. Colonialism, he



explains, was a power relationship between dominating and dominated cultures, providing a structural context in which anthropology was a subject-discipline. I would argue that the same is true of the ‘development’ system today. Not only does the development discourse shape our ideas and preconceptions of the communities that we study, but the information we produce as a result of our studies “can be drawn upon subsequently (and used or misused) by practitioners” (Gardner and Lewis 1996:133). As Sillitoe points out, “it is dangerous to pretend that intellectual discourse somehow isolates itself from the wider world.” (Sillitoe 2007:155).

We are therefore involved in development whether we like it or not. Our only option is to accept our responsibility to the communities that we study. This could mean becoming a practitioner and trying to change development from the inside, but it doesn’t have to. Ferguson (1990) has advised anthropologists not to get involved in the work of international development agencies: he argues that, even though the “promise of real ‘input’ ... makes the ‘development’ form of engagement such a tempting one for many intellectuals, ... pointing out errors and suggesting improvements is an integral part of the process of justifying and legitimating ‘development’ interventions” (284 – 285). He suggests instead that anthropologists offer their specialist knowledge and experience to more counter-hegemonic organisations such as indigenous rights movements. I would like to recommend two other possible alternatives to development work that may be open to anthropologists.

First, we need to make anthropological research available to a wider audience. The relative prestige of academic anthropology and the intense competition involved in reaching the higher echelons of the profession mean that too much valuable research is published in highbrow journals that are read only by a small elite, written in overly complicated jargon that renders it out of reach for practitioners and the general public. This has led to an unusual situation in which modernisation theory – all but dismissed by academics as early as the 1970s – still permeates the lay consciousness.

Second, we need to turn our ethnographic efforts away from developing communities and towards the development institutions themselves. There are “relatively few anthropologies of development” (Nolan). Ferguson (1990) and Mosse (2005) are notable exception, yet even their seminal ethnographies barely scratch the surface of what is still a highly obscure system. Unfortunately, at present anthropologists are more keen to study small, local NGOs than large donor agencies (Edelman). This is to be expected, give the anthropological concern with the particular; however, in neglecting studies of the larger institutions we may well be losing an invaluable opportunity to make a real contribution to the development debate.

## **Conclusion**

The involvement of anthropologists in development is problematic. It forces us to question some of our most deeply-held convictions and even to compromise between the interests of the communities we represent and those of donor agencies, who use the development discourse to achieve and maintain a position of power. Yet development is in constant dialogue with both applied and academic anthropology: non-involvement is therefore not an option for the anthropologist. “Development is happening, it might be



said, much of it bad, but some perhaps useful and wanted by those who are affected, with or without the participation of anthropologists. But there is a reasonable chance that the application of anthropological knowledge will moderate the bad and enhance the good.” (Grillo 1985:30).

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