Anthropology and Development: Evil Twin or Moral Narrative?

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The academy has chosen to categorize development anthropology as the discipline’s evil twin, since the livelihoods of those in the academy depend upon the intensive study of those whom development anthropology would change forever. But development anthropology can also be viewed as a project that provides a moral narrative, based on ethical concerns, that justifies involvement in the fate of others. These concerns are examined through four lenses: the postmodern critique of anthropology, an examination of what development anthropologists really do, the argument for an engaged anthropology, and the contribution of development ethics. By embedding development anthropology in this broader philosophical and historical context, it can then be viewed, and perhaps appreciated, as the discipline’s moral—rather than its evil—twin.

Key words: values, ethics, praxis, meaning, engagement, development anthropology

This is the power of development: the power to transform old worlds, the power to imagine new ones.

Jonathan Crush, 1995:2

Development is the management of a promise—and what if the promise does not deliver?

Jan Nederveen Pieterse, 2000:176

Why should we follow the local ideas, rather than the best ideas we can find?

Martha Nussbaum, 2000:49

Anthropology and Development

The anthropological engagement with development continues to be contested, contentious, and criticized—but more from the anthropological than the developmental side, a process that has increasingly assumed an air of permanence, perhaps exacerbated by the growing number of anthropologists directly or indirectly involved in development. The strained relationship that exists between academic and development anthropology, in which the former views the latter as second-rate, both intellectually and morally (Gow 1993), and the latter views the former as irrelevant, both theoretically and politically (Little and Painter 1995), has been characterized as an ongoing family dispute (Ferguson 1997). Given that this debate has been going on for 50 years or so, at least since the time of Cornell University’s Vicos Project in Peru in the 1950s, if not before, one can conclude that this inherent tension may have become an integral characteristic of the relationship (Doughty 1986). But anthropology as discipline and profession is home to an increasingly complicated relationship among academic anthropologists who do not undertake applied work, academic anthropologists who do, and practicing anthropologists who have no direct relationship with the academy. In practice, then, this strained relationship may spread its net quite broadly, pitting academic against academic and academic against practitioner (Nolan 2002). To state that these differences may have faded, as least in the United States, while debates over postmodern issues of discourse, agency, authority, and reflexivity continue to resonate elsewhere—implying that these issues have little or nothing to contribute to the debate—is to run the risk of blinkering, hobbling, perhaps maiming anthropology’s engagement with development, both within and outside the academy (Horowitz 1998a). There has been a tendency for those more applied to cavalierly ignore concepts that are prefixed with “post”: postdevelopment, postmodernism, and poststructuralism.

This dispute within the academy involves both intimacy and resentment, as well as a certain element of inevitability: the livelihoods of those in the academy depend upon the intensive study of those whom development anthropology would change forever. Not for nothing has the academy

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labeled development its evil twin: “A twin that can seemingly never be embraced, accepted, or liked; but which just won’t leave” (Ferguson 1997:170). The key word here is “evil,” defined by Webster as “morally bad or wrong;...causing pain or trouble; offensive or disgusting;...threatening or bringing misfortune.” Once again, development anthropology is damned in moral terms, based partially on its failure, perhaps unwillingness would be more apposite, to conform to the culture of its own discipline. But also, one suspects, this damnation results from its perceived failure to “improve” or “civilize” the process of development. Had the subfield clearly demonstrated that it had made a “difference for the better,” then it is tempting to think the criticisms from within the academy might be more muted. This is particularly so, given recent critiques of the field and the call for viewing anthropological knowledge as a form of situated intervention, “as a way of pursuing specific political aims while simultaneously seeking lines of common political purpose with allies who stand elsewhere” (Gupta and Ferguson 1997:38-39).

Evil is not a word normally associated with anthropology, academic or applied. By using such a word, Ferguson, perhaps inadvertently, raises some more profound issues relating to the differences between the two, namely that of values and ethics, as well as that of meaning. In the case of development anthropology, such issues, if they are mentioned at all, are usually only lightly touched upon, and often in rather general humanistic terms. It is my contention that one way to better understand—and perhaps appreciate—development anthropology is through a critical analysis of the values, specifically the ethics, underlying this subfield, as demonstrated in the writings and practices of those anthropologists actively engaged with development, and the extent to which their work has made a difference, presumably for the better.

I shall take as my point of departure the designation of development anthropology as evil. While this may be the view of some within the academy, it is not widely shared outside. In fact, I shall try to argue the opposite, that development anthropology is a moral project, that the justification and rationale for its very existence are based on strong ethical principles. I hope to show that development anthropology is a moral narrative—“the stories we tell that make sense of distant places and explain why we should get involved in their plight” (Ignatieff 1997:97). Ferguson (1997) expresses deep concern that the academic critique of development appears to have little impact on the world of development, a critique that could be broadened to include more applied anthropological work. One obvious reason may be that so much of the criticism is damning, self-serving, and counterproductive. While the critics raise important questions, they rarely provide any practical “solutions” (Escobar 1995; Ferguson 1994). But another reason may be, as several critics have argued, that anthropological knowledge while privileged in theory, more often than not falls on deaf ears—simplicity and repetition win out over complexity and innovation (Hoben 1989).

Inverting Escobar (1991), I will argue that development anthropologists have not necessarily taken development for granted and accepted it as the normal state of affairs. Their involvement has in many cases been prompted more by ethical than by professional concerns. I shall try to demonstrate that these ethical concerns are not just an expression of self-righteous high-mindedness, but are rather an inheritance from the discipline’s roots in the Enlightenment on the one hand and the continuing passage of “enlightened” legislation by the United Nations and some of its specialized agencies on the other. That development, specifically those projects and programs in which anthropologists have chosen to become involved, may not have changed things for the better may say more about development and its problems than anthropology and its purported shortcomings. While there may be no long-term “solutions” to the problems of development, at the very least these programs may have prevented the situation from getting even worse.

I am interested in answering the following questions: What values underlie development anthropology? Where do these ideas come from? What gives development anthropologists their “moral authority”? What is the meaning of development? Partial answers to these questions will hopefully contribute to Ferguson’s (1997) plea that we engage in some foundational work to reconfigure the epistemic terrain upon which the divided house of anthropology now stands.

The paper is divided into four parts. In the first, I argue that the various “posts”—postdevelopment, postmodernism, and poststructuralism can make a constructive contribution to development anthropology. In the second, I discuss what anthropologists “really” do in terms of theory, policy, and practice, with particular emphasis on the effects of their endeavors. In the third, I present and analyze recent arguments put forward for an engaged anthropology. In the final section, I relate these anthropological justifications for intervention with some of the broader questions being raised in the field of development ethics and suggest areas of concern for an engaged anthropology of development.

Postdevelopment, Postmodernism, and Poststructuralism

The postmodern challenge to the anthropological engagement with development has been most effectively mounted by Escobar (1991, 1995), who, over the years, has been subjected to a barrage of criticism from his peers (see Edelman 1999: chapter 1; Grillo 1997; Healy 2001: chapter 15; and Little and Painter 1995). That his work has aroused such strong feelings would indicate that his criticisms were not only taken seriously, but that they may also have hit hard. The most recent critique (Little 2000) succinctly summarizes development anthropology’s principal preoccupations with his approach; first, the rejection of any comparative understanding of culture and society; second, the rejection of any comparative, systematic methodology in favor of “thick,” descriptive ethnography and discursive analysis; third, the
inability or unwillingness to recognize that development institutions are extremely heterogeneous; and, finally, the lack of realistic alternatives to development and a return to a form of grassroots populism. While these points are certainly relevant, I would like to demonstrate some of Escobar’s strengths and contributions to the study of development.

On a more general level, Escobar’s comments should be viewed within the broader context of the postmodern critique of academic anthropology, namely the writing of texts, the question of representation, and the establishment of authority, in this case developmental.1 On the more specific level of development, Escobar (1991) criticizes the anthropological involvement on various grounds: anthropologists’ uncritical acceptance of prevailing development paradigms; their support of development institutions’ preoccupation with poverty alleviation as a means of defusing potentially explosive situations; and, most provocatively, the claim that anthropologists have chosen to become part of the problem, rather than the solution (ibid.:667):

There is also an apparent neutrality in identifying people as a “problem” without realizing, first, that this definition of the “problem” has already been put together in Washington or some capital city of the Third World; second, that problems are defined in such a way that some development program has to be accepted as a legitimate solution; and, finally, that along with this “solution” come administrative measures that make people conform to the institution’s discursive and practical universe.

Above all, Escobar is interested in the relationship between knowledge and power, a theme explored further in his 1995 book, where he directly addresses one of the major paradoxes of our times: the relationship between the discourse of development and the practice of development. Instead of reducing the incidence of underdevelopment, there has been an increase, both within and between countries. To answer this question, he adopts a Foucauldian perspective and proposes to examine development as a discursive formation that systematically relates forms of knowledge and techniques of power. To understand development discourse, we must examine the relations among the various elements that constitute the discourse, rather than the elements per se, since it is the system that determines what can be thought and what can be said, framing what is acceptable and what is not, and setting: “[T]he rules that must be followed for this or that problem, theory, or object to emerge and be named, analyzed, and eventually transformed into a policy or plan” (Escobar 1995:41). Development discourse provides a justification for “development,” externally induced, with its own definition of the problem and ways it can be addressed, neither of which may have much grounding in reality. Problems can be reinvented or recast to conform with the prevailing dominant ideology, the “development gaze” of those in power (ibid.:155).

The primary purpose of development discourse is to “convince, to persuade, that this (and not that) is the way the world is and ought to be amended” (Crush 1995:5). This is not to argue that there is only one discourse, the discourse of development (Grillo 1997). There are obviously several discourses, not only those associated with institutions, but also those associated with specific disciplines. In a later article, Escobar (1997) explains that a poststructural approach highlights the role of language and meaning in the constitution of social reality. As a result, language and discourse are seen not as reflections of social reality, but as constitutive of it. This approach contrasts sharply with the common sense view of language underlying much of the writing in development anthropology, which holds that our experience of the world, and by association of development, is not affected by the form and content of language since it is viewed as a neutral tool for thought (Jordan 1991).

Ferguson (1994) demonstrates what this means in practice for Lesotho, by comparing what the World Bank wrote about the country in 1975 with readily available scholarly writings on the same topic. The differences are startling: by creating, or rather reinventing, Lesotho as a “traditional, backward” country desperately in need of “development,” the World Bank could justify its assistance and the type of institutions and programs necessary to solve the “problems.” Ferguson also introduces Foucault’s concept of governmentality, the belief in the central, determining role of national government—“neutral, unitary, and effective”—in solving a country’s development problems through mechanisms of control and domination, thereby highlighting the political character of the state and downplaying any political conflict that may impinge upon the development “interventions” proposed. He also questions our obsession with development “failure,” but failure according to whom? Ferguson offers the critical observation that what is perhaps most important about a development program is not so much what it fails to do, but what it does do. He suggests that there is an unspoken logic underlying such failures: they may be better viewed as “instrument-effects”—effects that, on closer inspection, turn out to be an exercise of power.

But this critique of anthropological engagement with development should also be considered within the broader context of contemporary critiques of development itself—postdevelopment attempts to demonstrate why development interventions do not work. The enduring persistence of poverty is a major challenge, and postdevelopment is based on the premise that attaining a middle-class lifestyle for the majority of the world population is impossible. While postdevelopment includes many strands, among the more contentious issues are the problematization of poverty, the portrayal of development as a form of westernization, and the critique of modernism and science (Nederveen Pieterse 2000). While there are legitimate grounds for these critiques, postdevelopment is often faulted—as Escobar has been—for not presenting viable alternatives; in other words, for not being instrumental (ibid.:188):

‘Post-development’ is misconceived because it attributes to ‘development’ a single and narrow meaning,
process and facilitate broader participation, a perspective both social knowledge can be used to democratize the planning process. To deal with these critiques, Nustad cites the critique of Cowen and Shenton (1995). If the goal of development is to offer people more choices in determining their futures, this presupposes “a desire and capacity to choose, as well as a knowledge of possible choices” (ibid.:4). But these factors are often considered a precondition for development as well as the goal for development. The missing link is trusteeship—an individual or institution who guides and controls the development process. To deal with these critiques, Nustad cites the critical need to study manifestations of development on the ground in concrete encounters, specifically examining how poverty is produced, and the relationship between processes that produce wealth and poverty.

What Do Development Anthropologists Really Do?

While development anthropologists can play various roles and occupy a variety of positions, they perform three overlapping functions: “They collect and analyze information; they help design plans and policies; and they carry out these plans through action” (Nolan 2002:72, emphasis in original). This anthropological engagement is based on the strong belief that the selective use of anthropological knowledge can make a difference for the better, though there is considerable divergence of opinion on how this knowledge can be most effectively utilized. In his recent book, Nolan (2002:253) categorically states that the discipline has no framework for the application of this knowledge. At one extreme is Michael Cernea, employed for many years at the World Bank, who has perhaps contributed more than any other social scientist to making the case for the positive contributions of anthropological knowledge (Cernea 1995). His work is characterized by a strong faith in a modified form of social engineering (Cernea 1991:29, emphasis added):

The social engineering action model is rooted in knowledge of the social fabric and dynamics. It postulates the translation of social science knowledge into new knowledge and change tools, and uses this knowledge purposively to organize new social action and relationships.

Cernea justifies this model on the grounds that better social knowledge can be used to democratize the planning process and facilitate broader participation, a perspective both ethically and professionally acceptable. In fact, what he is proposing is a contemporary version of anthropological authority, in this case developmental authority, in which the social scientist—and only the social scientist—is uniquely positioned to decide for and speak on behalf of local people (ibid.:31):

The social scientist is the only kind of expert who is professionally trained to “listen to the people.” Social knowledge thus developed becomes a “hearing system” able to amplify the listening for managers and policymakers too.

This “social engineering action model,” embedded in the belief that social knowledge should be used “purposively to organize new social action and relationships,” is contrasted with the “enlightenment model,” which, based on a belief in education, “implies a tortuous, uncertain, and slow way to return the benefits of social knowledge to society and influence its progress” (ibid.:29). In other words, social engineering is associated with action, certainty, hierarchy, and the right of a professional elite to make decisions affecting the lives of others, all justified in the name of social science and social knowledge.

A more modest approach is advocated by Alan Hoben, one of the first anthropologists to occupy a senior position in USAID, and also one of the first, if not the first, to write about the anthropological experience of working for development institutions. He proposed that development anthropology could provide a critical, but productive contribution, by challenging and clarifying many of the assumptions underlying development policies (Hoben 1982:370):

Its [development anthropology’s] most valuable contribution to development work is to challenge and clarify, and hence to help revise, explicit and implicit assumptions made by those responsible for planning and implementing development policies about problems to be solved and about the institutional linkages between proposed policy interventions and their impact on income, asset distribution, employment, health, and nutrition.

This anthropological willingness to “challenge and to clarify”—in other words, to be critical—is one which has often been sadly lacking, at least from the applied prospect (Chambers 1987). For Hoben (1982:369), development anthropology’s contributions lie primarily in policy and planning, in providing a view of development from below, and in clarifying the organization, interests, and strategies of local elites and bureaucrats.

Michael Horowitz, director of the Institute for Development Anthropology (IDA) and another of the first anthropologists to work for USAID, has pinpointed the various functional areas in which he believes that development anthropology has made a major contribution. These range from involuntary relocation, colonization, and resettlement to the relevance of local organizations and the nature of elites (Horowitz 1996a). Reiterating Cernea, however, he admits that—at least until the late 1980s—development anthropologists failed to communicate the results of this work...
beyond the profession. Little (2000) has clearly demonstrated the contributions of anthropological research to a better understanding of such topics as the household economy, common property systems, and formal and informal economies. In his Malinowski Award Lecture, Cernea (1995) elaborated upon this, emphasizing the importance of the study of patterns of social organization as a means of improving the management of development, as well as the various policy domains to which anthropology has contributed—social, sectoral, socioeconomic, and environmental.

This belief in the practical relevance of anthropological knowledge has been—and continues to be—widespread within the field of development practitioners (Gardner and Lewis 1996). But there is little empirical evidence to substantiate these claims, apart from isolated case studies of specific development activities where the anthropological contribution has been well documented (Bennett 1996). The Agroforestry Outreach Project in Haiti is one such project (Murray 1997) and the International Potato Center in Peru is another (Rhoades 1986).

Cernea often refers to a much-cited comparative study in which Conrad Kottak (1991) undertook a content analysis of the evaluations of 68 development projects financed by the World Bank to assess the contribution of “sociocultural compatibility” to project success. Sociocultural compatibility referred to the extent to which the project fit with local culture, and project success was measured in terms of economic rate of return. Those projects judged socioculturally compatible, with a demonstrated understanding and analysis of social conditions, were found to have a rate of return more than twice as high as those judged deficient in these areas. One of the major problems with this analysis is, however, the very narrow definition of development, restricted to the rate of return on the bank’s investment, a datum that says nothing about many of the other goals of development that may interest anthropologists, such as equity, poverty alleviation, environmental sustainability, and empowerment, to name the more enduring.

No one, I think, is questioning the claim that anthropological knowledge can contribute to improving the development process. The question is not so much what anthropology has to offer, but rather how it can effectively contribute. In other words, how can the anthropological voice be heard and acted upon? Here, I would like to offer some additional evidence to ponder: first, personal “testimony” from two well-respected experts in the field; second, some policy-related evidence from two other authorities; and, finally, some comparative material on the effects of social analysis on the thinking and actions of the donor community.

In addressing this question, William Partridge (1995), employed for many years by the World Bank, focuses on the political dimension, comparing two resettlement programs, one in India and the other in Guatemala, for which he provided anthropological input. In the first case, his findings were rejected, while in the second they were warmly accepted. From his perspective, these contrasting responses were in no way related to the quality of the work—the difference lay in the manager who decided to act on the information: “Our problem is not one of analysis or methodology; it is one of taking action on recommendations that fly in the face of powerful political interests” (ibid.:207).

Horowitz (1999) tells a similar story about IDA’s participation in a long-term study of population resettlement from the reservoir above the Manantali Dam on a major tributary of the Senegal River in Mali. The government of Senegal, the principal actor among the three countries involved, amended its master plan to incorporate IDA’s major recommendations. This unusually positive reception was due to a variety of factors: the multinational, interdisciplinary composition of the research team; the close collaboration with the national government; and the distribution of IDA’s report to the local population, translated into their language, among others. But the World Bank, the major donor involved, refused to support the changes despite direct representations on the part of concerned parties in Washington, including the Environmental Protection Agency, the Department of the Treasury, and USAID (Horowitz 1998). Horowitz explains the bank’s intransigence as a result of two factors—pressure from the French who wanted to see French companies involved in implementing the project in their former colonies, and the bank’s claim that the dam in question had improved the living conditions of the local people. As he justifiably asks: Where were the anthropologists within the World Bank?

On a more optimistic tone, and with a more forward-looking frame of mind, Robert and Beverly Hackenberg (1999), in their Malinowski Award Lecture, reviewed the differing societal levels at which applied anthropology has intervened: community; developing city, borderlands, and the “postcolonial map,” this latter described as a more global perspective on the borderlands, characterized by decentering, deterritorialization, diaspora, delocalization, and transnationalism (Kearney 1995). Drawing on their own considerable experience working in the United States and the developing world, the Hackenbergs take a more inductive approach to the question of the effect of anthropological knowledge, arguing instead that the knowledge and experience, the praxis if you will, gained from designing and implementing applied projects can form the basis for policy formulation.

At the level of the postnational map, which exists as a concept rather than a dimensional reality, they focus on the borderlands—“[which] is a ‘point of articulation’—perhaps a point of collision would describe it more accurately—at which the intersection of unidentified and unplanned determinants produces a kaleidoscope of unpredicted consequences” (ibid.:9). Among the issues they address, the solutions to which they believe anthropological knowledge can contribute, are management of natural resources, environmental consequences of development, the traffic in people, the informal economy, and concern for endangered species. This will be achieved, echoing Partridge and Horowitz, through political authority—being actively engaged
in policy making and policy promotion—and moral authority: “The attempt to leverage a policy issue in the direction of a favorable outcome rests primarily on our capacity to involve and manipulate universal human values, and focus them on specific issues” (ibid.:11).

This increasing emphasis on anthropology’s potential contribution to policy formulation has been enthusiastically embraced by Cernea. In his Malinowski Award Lecture, he focuses on the issue of resettlement policy where both he, and the World Bank, have made significant contributions. What is not addressed, however, is how problematic policy implementation has proved to be, as demonstrated by the findings from the bank’s worldwide study of its own resettlement programs, which concluded that “lack of attention to social impacts of displacement caused long-term impoverishment in affected populations (World Bank 1994:9, cited in Horowitz 1996b:6).

Social analysis is often regarded as one of anthropology’s major contributions to donor-supported development (Nolan 2002:167-171), although a strong case can be made that success or failure in development has little to do with the quality of the social analysis in particular, or project designs in general, which are basically advocacy documents to obtain funding, not planning documents to facilitate implementation. Some critics argue that serious planning only begins once the funds are approved (Grindle 1980). Based on two decades of work within the World Bank, Cernea (1996:10, emphasis in original) categorically—and pragmatically—states that: “For all these reasons—economic, social, moral, financial—social analysis is not only instrumental but, in my view, is indispensable. It directly increases the success of programs.” But comparative reviews of the effects of such analyses tend to question this assumption.

A 1989 review of USAID’s experiences with social analysis drew on interviews, case studies, and a review of project documentation from 1975 to 1989 in the fields of health, agriculture, and the private sector (Gow et al. 1989). While those interviewed noted that the introduction of social analysis had a positive impact on USAID’s sensitivity to human, cultural, and institutional issues, they also noted several shortcomings: the need for better integration with other analyses; the need to address the broader spectrum of the agency’s priorities; and the need to offer concrete practical solutions and alternatives. Case study material corroborated these findings: social analysis was most effective when it offered practical solutions and alternatives to potential problems, at both the design and the implementation phases. Although the documentation review indicated that the feasibility component, in theory the one that takes the closest look at potential implementation problems, showed the closest correlation with project success, the overall relationship was not as strong as predicted.

Rew (1997) reports on a similar, but much broader document review conducted in the United Kingdom, using readily available project reports from five development institutions, one multilateral and four bilateral, across five sectors—natural resources, roads, education and training, health, and urban issues (Rew and Bunting 1992). The study concentrated on final evaluation reports on projects completed in the 1980s and tried to establish the degree of interest in sociocultural factors within the text, specifically the degree to which such factors were recognized and used. To the researchers’ surprise, 75 percent of the reports mentioned sociocultural factors in one way or another, but often as a form of catchall residual category for problems that could not be explained by technical or economic analyses. Cultural and social considerations were generally considered beyond the purview of project design and implementation, though this did not preclude inclusion of a social scientist on technical assistance teams. Nevertheless, as with the review of USAID, it was difficult to establish the extent of such social scientists’ impact on either design or implementation.4

Assessments of the World Bank’s performance in the field of social analysis vary considerably. A study of anthropologists working within the bank in the 1990s revealed that even among themselves there was no consensus (Kaminskis 2000:41):

**Anthropologist A:** The Bank’s attitude has…changed dramatically. Ten years ago it was more difficult for an anthropologist to voice concerns about the social impact (or lack of it) of a project. Anthropologists were looked at as a rather eccentric people, interesting in nature, but not really instrumental for the work the Bank does. Nowadays, things have changed. The serious and effective work by senior anthropologists has gained respect and acceptance from the institution, in benefit of the more junior anthropologists in the institution.

This relatively positive appraisal received additional support in an article written by two anthropologists, at that time employed by the World Bank, on the process of institutionalizing social analysis within the institution. From their perspective, such analysis had resulted in tangible improvements to “operational design” by mitigating the adverse social impacts of projects, maximizing their social benefits, and ensuring their “fit” for those supposed to benefit (Francis and Jacobs 1999). But this view was not shared by all (Kaminskis 2000:37):

**Anthropologist B:** Personally, I think that some people are really, really careful about social impacts and others are not. So you have the people who do it because they believe in it, the others who do it because they don’t have an alternative, and others who try to skip as much as they can. …In some cases it’s not the money…it’s more the attitudes of the Task Managers because if the Task Manager wants to do it, he or she finds the money. Sometimes, even if the money is there, they don’t want to do it.

One major criticism of the bank’s approach to social analysis is the lack of attention to structural factors, such as the distribution of assets, income, and power across class, gender, and ethnicity, all of which may severely affect human well-being (Francis 2001; Horowitz 1996b). These reservations were substantiated in a subsequent World Bank (1999) review of 100 projects and their progress in
operationalizing social issues, which faulted the institution for widely neglecting gender issues and social impact monitoring. More seriously, however, the report highlighted the routine neglect of social factors in the design of structural adjustment programs, made more egregious by the fact that explicit objectives for poverty reduction are articulated in the bank’s own directives for such programs (Francis 2001:86), reinforcing the point made earlier when talking about the problems of implementing resettlement policies—the lack of political authority. Reviewing the anthropological contribution to public policy—and the frustrations involved—on such issues as globalization, social welfare, agriculture, the environment, and social inequality, Okongwu and Mencher (2000) challenge anthologists not only to formulate alternative policies, but also to work as advocates, to become more engaged with the people they study, and to lobby for change.

**The Case for an Engaged Anthropology**

In spite of the ambiguous nature of anthropology’s contributions to development, voices were clearly raised throughout the 1990s arguing for anthropology’s moral involvement (Horowitz 1996a:328):

> [I]t is morally necessary for anthropology to become centrally engaged in today’s critical issues—poverty, powerlessness, environmental degradation, and national, class, caste, gender, ethnic, religious, and racial oppressions—and that anthropology has important contributions yet to make about the kinds of formations that will characterize human social life in the twenty-first century.

This moral imperative is reiterated in two books published in the 1990s arguing for anthropology’s moral involvement (Horowitz 1996a:328):

The Case for an Engaged Anthropology

In essence it [applied anthropology] symbolizes both the desire and desirability of human beings to fulfill themselves individually and collectively to the maximum of their physical-emotional-intellectual powers, and to do both as single personalities and in relation to other personalities (Thompson 1965:290-291, cited in Bennett 1996:S30).

Allowing for a few small semantic changes, this credo is one that many contemporary development anthropologists could and would support, a credo that has its origins in the Enlightenment and the belief in human perfectability, that “progress” was dependent upon people’s rational efforts to perfect themselves and their institutions (Bidney 1970:185). As a result, the prevailing criterion of progress was in the direction of greater rationality (Harris 1968:38), a measure that failed to capture the chaos, disorder, and irrationality of the ensuing process. Recent scholarship, drawing on the work of Saint-Simon, Comte, and particularly John Stuart Mill, has questioned the tendency to equate progress with development on the grounds that development can only be achieved if and when an element of order is introduced (Cowen and Shenton 1995).

This reformist tendency has been present in anthropology since the early 20th century, as personified by Franz Boas speaking truth to power in his battles against racism and cultural chauvinism. In this, he was motivated by his belief in humanism, his secular faith which prompted him to act. For Boas, the role of the anthropologist was both intellectual and moral: “the advancement of reason through science and the conquest of tradition, irrationality, and injustice” (Rabinow 1983:69). More explicitly (Lewis 2001:447, emphasis added):

> Franz Boas was passionately and consistently concerned about human rights and individual liberty, freedom of inquiry and speech, equality of opportunity, and the defeat of prejudice and chauvinism. He struggled for a lifetime to advance a science that would serve humanity.

It is precisely this emphasis on the moral, and by association the political, that has continued to trouble the academy, whether in the form of the D’Andrade/Scheper-Hughes debate in the mid-1990s or the more recent furor over Tierney’s (2000) exposé of the anthropological involvement with the Yanomami of Brazil. D’Andrade (1995) feared that anthropology is being transformed from a discipline based upon an objective model of the world—one that gives information about the object being studied rather than our response to that thing—to one based upon a moral model of the world, the primary purpose of which is “to identify what is good
and what is bad and to allocate reward and punishment" (ibid.:399, emphasis in original). Among his many criticisms, the major one was intellectual—the objective model provides a surer understanding of how the world works: “anthropology can maintain its moral authority only on the basis of empirically demonstrable truths” (ibid.:408).

For Scheper-Hughes (1995:416), “those of us who make our living observing and recording the misery of the world”—and I would include many development anthropologists in this category—“have a particular obligation to reflect critically on how we choose to represent the human suffering that engages us.” The shock effect soon dissipates as people—including anthropologists—learn to live with and accept this reality, whether occurring “here” or “there,” by holding it at arm’s length. But this does not have to be. Responding to D’Andrade, Scheper-Hughes agreed that there are two distinctly anthropological ways of engaging with the world: the spectator, neutral and objective, who observes and is above the fray, accountable to “science”; and the witness, active and morally committed, one who takes sides and makes judgments, where the ethical is primary: “Anthropologists as witnesses are accountable for what they see and what they fail to see, how they act and how they fail to act in critical situations” (ibid.:419). This implies both a specific positioning and the responsibility of producing testimony, “a form of caring vigilance” (Hebdige 1993, cited in Malkki 1997:94). But paraphrasing Camus, this also implies that we “take the victim’s side and the side of potential victims” (Schue 1980:33).

While the moral basis and justification for contemporary development anthropology can be situated within the historical context of both anthropology and development, and their relationship to the Enlightenment, a third important source, albeit implicit, has been human rights, particularly the Universal Declaration of Human Rights adopted by the United Nations in 1948. For Friedmann (1992), the UN declaration established a code of moral conduct for how we treat each other as human beings, specifically how the state is expected to treat its citizens. But in addition, it also established the basic principles that can make possible the creation of a society where people can flourish, that is, those social conditions that can make it possible for people to live up to their capacity.

Anthropology’s engagement with human rights has been characteristically paradoxical and ambiguous. For the cultural relativists, human rights are socially constructed and inseparable from the mentality of the Enlightenment, and, hence, the product of a particular society at a particular time: Europe in the aftermath of the Second World War. As a result, the UN declaration is universal only in pretension, not in practice (Wilson 1997), another “cunning exercise in Western moral imagination” (Ignatieff 2001a:102). More recently, Franck (2001) has argued that the human rights canon is full of rules that are actually the products of historical processes—industrialization, urbanization, the communications and information revolutions—but which are replicable anywhere, even if they occurred first in the West. For those involved in applied and developmental work, the relationship has been more ambiguous. Supporters for the social, political, and cultural values of certain newly independent states often chose to ignore the growing incidence of human rights abuses resulting from political violence and repression (Washburn 1987). But as the study and practice of development grew, do did the incidence of human rights abuses involving indigenous people, those forced to relocate, and, more recently, the victims of civil war and political violence, all of which have been topics of anthropological research and advocacy (Messer 1993). But as the attention to human rights has increased so has the criticism, directed particularly at their purported universalism. Human rights doctrine arouses strong opposition precisely because it challenges the control exercised by entrenched power on behalf of the powerless (Ignatieff 2001a:109):

Rights are universal because they define the universal interests of the powerless—namely, that power be exercised over them in ways that respect their autonomy as agents. In this sense, human rights represent a revolutionary creed, since they make a radical demand of all human groups that they serve the interests of the individuals who compose them.

Although never clearly articulated, much less acknowledged, it is the ambiguous legacy of the Enlightenment, with its strong overtones of social engineering, social control, and “knowing trusteeship,” that has perhaps contributed most to the moral basis of development anthropology. While the discourses of human rights and basic human needs have helped establish and justify the minimum responsibilities of the state toward its citizens, it is the Enlightenment’s contemporary progeny, alternative development, that most clearly articulates anthropology’s engagement with development, a commitment characterized by strong moral values, an approach which incorporates ideas of community, local control, and ecological concerns, ideas which often originate in the West. Since national elites in the third world are generally corrupt and show little interest in such populist approaches, the responsibility will fall upon the willing shoulders of international development organizations: “trusteeship (though none dare speak its name) will have to be exercised by the knowing and the moral on behalf of the ignorant and corrupt” (Covens and Shenton 1995:43).

Nederveen Pieterse (1998) has argued that much of what alternative development stands for—equity, participation, empowerment, sustainability, and improved well-being—consists of aspirations rather than attributes of development. As such, many of these aspirations can easily be added on or incorporated into mainstream development discourse. For him, these are normative orientations, a set of values that serve to justify, rather than explain, development.

These values have been most clearly—and most consistently—articulated by Robert Chambers. Although not an anthropologist, Chambers often thinks and writes like one.
He has often been labeled a “populist,” someone who “puts the last first” and finds much of the academic literature on development irrelevant for solving the more pressing social problems encountered in the third world. The model he presents, as in much of his writing, is characterized by a series of powerful binary oppositions, justified on moral and empirical grounds (Chambers 1997a, 1997b). But his writings are also, like much of development literature, remarkably apolitical—he rarely deals directly with the politics of development.

Chambers terms his model “responsible well-being” and bases it on years of accumulated experience working in the field with various applied research methodologies, particularly participatory rural appraisal (PRA). From this experience he has distilled certain words and concepts, more moral and metaphysical than practical and developmental, words such as: commitment, disempowerment, doubt, fulfillment, fun, generosity, responsibility, self-critical awareness, sharing, and trust (Chambers 1997b:1748). This experience has also reinforced the importance of the behavior and attitudes of those “doing development,” both of which, Chambers tellingly comments, have been prominently absent from most professional training and most development agendas.

Combining locally defined concepts of well-being (“the experience of good quality of life”) with that of personal responsibility, Chambers creates the idea of “responsible well-being” as an overarching end to which all else—livelihood security, human capabilities, equity, and sustainability—contributes, and to which the powerful and the wealthy have perhaps the most to contribute (ibid.:1749, emphasis in original):

Responsible well-being recognizes obligations to others, both those alive and future generations, and to their quality of life. In general, the word responsible has moral force in proportion to wealth and power…. Responsible well-being refers thus to doing as well as being: it is “by” as well as “for.” The objective of development then becomes responsible well-being by all and for all.

With its emphasis on personal responsibility and equity, the work of Chambers is imbued with a high moral seriousness, despite his disclaimer that this model is empirical and inductive. For better or worse, Chambers is making the case for personal conversion as the basis for development, a quasi-religious experience (Henkel and Stirrat 2001). For this reason, the values he stresses relate much more to the work of “moral” economists, such as Amartya Sen (1999), and moral philosophers, such as Martha Nussbaum (2000), and those who write about development ethics, authors such as David Crocker (1991) and Mozzafar Qizilbash (1996), than they do to those who usually write about development. What he is writing about and what he is arguing for is the creation of a “just society,” both “here” and “there,” since the responsibilities of northerners to “distant strangers” can only be met by starting here, rather than there (Ignatieff 2001b).

The Way Ahead for an Engaged Anthropology

Underlying much of the contemporary discourse on development, postdevelopment, and alternative development is an obsession with participation and empowerment, concepts that have only recently been subjected to critical scrutiny (Henkel and Stirrat 2001). Part of the broad-based appeal of participation lies in the fact that it can function as form of decentralization: it shifts the “ownership” of development projects, as well as the responsibility for the consequences of the projects, from the development agencies to the local population, so that the latter are, in a sense, held accountable for the actions of the former, who now become “mere” facilitators. The practical implications of empowerment can be more chilling. The key question that needs to be addressed is: Why are people “empowered”? They are being “empowered” to “participate” in the project of modernity (ibid.:182):

the attempt to empower people through the projects envisaged and implemented by the practitioners of the new orthodoxy is always an attempt, however benevolent, to reshape the personhood of the participants. It is in this sense that we argue that ‘empowerment’ is tantamount to what Foucault calls subjection.

Hence, development anthropology needs to move beyond these concepts and offer a clearer idea of what sort of society it would like to create. In addition, there is a need to bring politics back in—much of contemporary development discourse turns a blind eye to the issue of power and its distribution in society. Given the increasing interest and importance attached to the concept of civil society, it is somewhat surprising that anthropology has contributed so little, an odd omission since the concept includes various components, such as social relations and social organization, class and conflict, and agency and autonomy, that were once the bread and butter of the discipline. Discussions of civil society, in turn, raise questions about the type of society desired (Howell and Pearce 2001:37):

It [the concept of civil society] reflects a multiplicity of diverse and often diverging voices that share a wish to preserve a concern for a common humanity, undo the negative aspects of capitalist development, and promote forms of economic organization that are environmentally sustainable and socially just.

To a certain extent, both development anthropology and development ethics, as well as human rights, have tended to focus on the individual—on the one hand outlining the responsibilities and obligations of the state (or its surrogates) toward the individual, and on the other attempting to list the necessary capabilities that will contribute toward the achievement of human flourishing. Development ethics refers to “the normative or ethical assessment of the ends and means of Third World and global development” (Crocker 1991:457). This definition, in turn, gives rise to two major questions:
1) What ethical and other value issues emerge in development policies and practices and how should they be resolved?: and 2) What moral responsibilities, if any, do rich countries, regions, and classes have toward impoverished countries, regions, and classes? Qizilbash (1996:1210) provides one possible answer to these questions when he suggests that ethical development occurs “if and only if there is some overall expansion in human flourishing or the quality of human lives or human well-being consistent with the demands of social justice and freedom.”

The UNDP’s Human Development Report (1990:1) owes a great deal to the work of Sen. Since the publication of the first such report, the focus has been on expanding people’s choices: access to income, a long healthy life, education, a decent standard of living, political freedom, guaranteed human rights, and personal self-respect. For the UNDP the basic objective of development has been to “create an enabling environment for people to live long, healthy and creative lives” (ibid.:9, cited in Qizilbash 1996:1215). Subsequent reports have reiterated these themes, underlining the importance of viewing human development as a process of enlarging people’s choices and expanding human functions and capabilities, the range of things that people can do or be in life (UNDP 2000:17). For the UNDP (2001:9), there are four essential capabilities for people: to lead a long and healthy life, to be knowledgeable, to have the resources necessary for a decent standard of living, and to be able to participate in the life of the community. Underlying Sen’s (1995:75) approach and, of course, much of his work on development, is the importance of freedom; in fact, he views development primarily as a process of expanding human freedoms.

Although Sen provides few specifics on which particular capabilities should be included, these shortcomings have been addressed by Nussbaum (2000), where, following Aristotle, she attempts to list those capabilities which will contribute to human flourishing, virtuous lives, and human justice by answering the central question: What is a person able to do and to be? (ibid.:71). Underlying her approach is a focus on human dignity: while certain functions are central to any understanding of what it is to be human, there is something specifically human in the ways these functions are performed (ibid.:72):

The core idea is that of the human being as a dignified free being who shapes his or her own life in cooperation and reciprocity with others, rather than being passively shaped or pushed around by the world in the manner of a “flock” or “herd” animal. A life that is really human is one that is shaped throughout by these human powers of practical reason and sociability.

For Nussbaum, it is capabilities that provide the opportunity to choose. This is so because of the great importance she attaches to practical reason. Hence, she chooses to call her current version of the list “central human functional capabilities.” The list itself consists of separate components, all of which are of central importance and all of which are distinct in quality. Of particular relevance here is her claim that certain human capabilities exert a moral claim that they should be developed. This she proposes as a freestanding moral idea that does not rely on a particular metaphysical or teleological view: her argument begins from ethical premises upon which she draws her ethical conclusions (ibid.:83).

The list consists of ten capabilities, four of which I shall mention here since they directly contribute to a better understanding of the meaning of development and the values underlying it. All four speak directly to both the quality and the meaning of life. The fourth—senses, imagination, and thought—argues for the capability to sense, to imagine, to think, and to reason in a “truly human” way, informed and cultivated by an adequate education. It also includes being able to search for the ultimate meaning of life, and this would support personal autonomy. The sixth—practical reason—argues for the capability to conceive of the good and to be critically reflective about the planning of one’s own life. This would imply the fostering of a critical self-awareness within the larger context of what constitutes “the good society.” The seventh—affiliation—is divided into two parts. The first underlines the capability to live with and for others, to demonstrate concern, empathy, and compassion, and to have the capability for justice and friendship. This is another way of stressing our responsibilities to others, both friends and strangers. The second part argues against discrimination of all sorts in support of self-respect and nonhumiliation, where a person is treated as a “dignified being whose worth is equal to that of others” (ibid.:79). The tenth capability—control over one’s environment—is also divided into two parts. The first is political and deals with the capability to participate effectively in political choices that govern one’s life, and the second is material and argues for the importance of property rights, not just formally but in terms of real opportunity on an equal basis with others. This final capability is associated with certain rights, such as guarantees of freedom of speech and association and of freedom from unwarranted search and seizure. Embedded in this list is a strong commitment to equality, since discrimination in its various forms is viewed as a type of indignity or humiliation (ibid.:86).

While these philosophical concepts may indeed contribute in some abstract way to better understanding of what human flourishing implies, development anthropology needs to have a more practical, realistic vision in sight, one based on what the poor themselves have to say. I would like to offer two suggestions regarding how anthropologists can deal with this. One way is through a reappraisal of the potential role of praxis in guiding how anthropologists should conduct themselves. A second way is to think of the types of development activities that could provide the foundations for the flourishing of some of these capabilities.

In ordinary English usage, “praxis” is usually translated as “practice,” a definition that dilutes considerably the meaning ascribed to it by Aristotle, who used the term to designate the arts and sciences that deal with ethical and political life. In so doing, he carefully distinguished between theoria and
praxis. While the former refers to theories and activities concerned with the production of knowledge for its own sake, the latter refers to theories and activities that create knowledge instrumental in achieving ethical and political ends (Partridge 1987). This distinction owes much to the work of Marx and his eleventh thesis on Feuerbach, where he appears to underline the importance of philosophy, the highest form of theory, to guide practice (Warry 1992). Theory can only inform practice and, since it is often an exclusive discourse, is often irrelevant for strategic purposes or instrumental action.

Praxis itself, then, is a type of knowledge of the world, partly objective and partly subjective: it consists of negotiation between objective knowledge of the world, operative in a given time and place, and subjective experience of the world found in ongoing human action. From this process emerge implicit patterns that underlie human existence (Baba 2000). But it is also a way of knowing which embodies ethical and political theory and practice as processes of social life. As a result, the practitioner of praxis balances theory with activity and lives life making ethical and political decisions that matter, a process that calls for continuous adjustment (Partridge 1987). Since praxis is concerned with change, it is oriented more toward the present and prediction of the future, rather than to the interpretation of previous events. It also involves creating the conditions for people to act on their own behalf. Integral to such a theory of practice is an ethics of action, based on commitment to socially responsible work and professional integrity, as well as a willingness to accept a moral responsibility for the consequences of one’s actions.

As an example of this approach—“values-oriented action in anthropology”—Baba (2000) cites Sol Tax’s Fox Project, which embedded an ethical imperative similar to that of praxis theory and was inspired by the work of John Dewey. According to Dewey, all inquiry was communal and should return something of value to the community, something good in a fundamental sense, where the good was defined as “that which enables the actualization of human potential, especially personal growth and development” (ibid.:33). While some commentators, particularly Bennett (1996:S34-S39), strongly question the influence of Dewey, as well as some of the claims made by Tax, others such as Foley (1999), are more sympathetic, allowing that Tax may well have thought of himself as a philosophical pragmatist. While those most directly involved in the Fox Project claimed that Tax followed a “very democratic, dialogic pragmatist theory of science,” Foley, based on interviews and fieldwork, states that the action anthropology they practiced was marked by a certain amount of social engineering. Be that as it may, this does not necessarily invalidate his approach, nor the argument in favor of praxis.

What sorts of development activities could provide the foundations for the flourishing of Chambers’s concept of responsible well-being and the more salient of Nussbaum’s capabilities? One of anthropology’s explicit agendas is to provide a voice for those who are not heard, those who are usually ignored—the poor, the marginalized, the disenfranchised, those who are discriminated against. A recent World Bank study brings together the experiences of over 60,000 poor women and men throughout the developing world. Each volume offers overlapping, interrelated recommendations about how to do development better. The first volume offers suggestions regarding process, the second (in which Chambers participated) a series of laudable objectives—“from unequal and troubled gender relations to equity and harmony”—and the third practical objectives, which include promotion of economic policies that favor the poor; investment in poor people’s assets and capabilities; addressing gender inequity and the vulnerability of children; and the protection of the rights of the poor (Narayan and Petesch 2002:487-493).

Development Anthropology as Moral Narrative

Central to development anthropology is the belief that the enlightened have a positive contribution to make to the realization of responsible human well-being. But there is a double irony here. On the one hand, development anthropologists find themselves in the same predicament as those they study and represent—how to make their voices heard and how to make society respond. On the other, while anthropological knowledge may improve understanding, this invariably implies “our” understanding of “them,” and, hence, the possibility for greater control on our part and their eventual integration into a type of society on terms over which local people have little or no control.

Given this impasse, development anthropology can justify itself and its contribution to development in both practical and moral terms, but only by moving beyond well-meaning liberal platitudes, specifying what these values are, and how development can contribute to their realization. Many of these values have been presented within the context of human rights and basic needs discourses, values to which many anthropologists working in development already subscribe, implicitly or explicitly. But there is a need to move beyond stating and believing the obvious.

Who, for example, will argue against Article 25 of the UN Declaration of Human Rights, which states that “everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and his [sic] family”? What is needed, and this is why the work of Sen and Nussbaum is important, albeit sketched very briefly here, is some statement about the quality of the lives that will result from the achievement of these rights and needs.

For both of them, development should be a liberating process that provides people with the chance to live fuller, richer, more meaningful, flourishing lives, with a particular focus on certain key capabilities: practical reason, the imagination, empathy, community, justice, friendship, and the two freedoms—autonomy and liberty. For Chambers, this human flourishing is embedded in the concept of responsible well-being which, among other things, underlines the idea of stewardship and our obligations to this and future
generations, whether as witnesses of the human condition or practitioners of a form of caring vigilance, which implies a commitment—not only to “speak truth to power,” but also a willingness to become involved, to take a stand, and to side with the victim.

By framing the values of development in moral terms, rather than say economic terms (the market) or political terms (democracy), these writers not only escape from the tyranny of ideology, academic discipline, and political fashion; they also elevate the general tone of development discourse, for what they are proposing is a vision of the “good society.” I would like to suggest that this is where development anthropologists can perhaps make their most effective contribution: to the meaning of development. There are examples at hand. In his Malinowski Award Lecture, Thayer Scudder (1999) characterized himself as an “optimistic pessimist,” one who, in spite of all the growing evidence of impending social and environmental crises, remained hopeful that we, as a species, still have the potential to create a much better world. In a different, but similarly optimistic vein, Arturo Escobar (1997) has argued that anthropology must reconceptualize its engagement with development and focus on the differences and alternatives that may pose important challenges to conventional models and their underlying values.

As Corbridge (1994) has forcefully and eloquently argued, to change the world not only calls for an account of the world, but also a theory about how this world might change for the better. I would argue that this theory should be based on some agreement about the meaning of development. Within the academy, we might be better to view development anthropology as the discipline’s moral rather than its evil twin. Within development, anthropologists have chosen, for professional, personal, and perhaps emotional reasons, to be more concerned with the rural and the indigenous and more generally with the marginalized. But the present effects and future implications of globalization (however much contested), surely demonstrate once and for all the limitations of what is now ambiguously termed localization. Certain human needs and human rights can be taken as universal, the basis for a moral narrative in this new millennium of development.

Notes

11This number is not a misprint. The first volume, Can Anyone Hear Us?, records and analyzes the voices of 40,000 poor women and men from 50 countries included in the bank’s participatory poverty assessments conducted in the 1990s (Narayan et al. 2000a). The second volume, Crying Out for Change, draws material from a new comparative 23-country study and is dedicated to the more than 20,000 poor women, men, youth, and children who took the time to share their lives with the authors (Narayan et al. 2000b). The final volume, From Many Lands, presents 14 country case studies (Narayan and Petesch 2002).

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