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Discussion of Papers by Abraham/Platteau and Harragin

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Both of these papers are concerned with relations between aid donors and recipients in Africa. Abraham and Platteau offer a wide-ranging comparative critique of the community participation model for development; Harragin provides an ethnographic case study of aid relief in Southern Sudan. Both are angry. They are angry with the aid donors for being remote, arrogant and superficial. Mostly they are frustrated by the persistent failure of African aid to be put to effective use. But they are diametrically opposed in the approach they advocate for dealing with local African populations.

Platteau believes that African "tribal" or "traditional village" societies are enmeshed in a cultural complex that must itself be broken if genuine development is to be made possible. The agents of this would be a reforming bureaucracy sustained by a strong central state and by aid donors more willing to take the long view of popular mobilization than they are at present. Harragin holds that "targeting the vulnerable" in famine relief is window-dressing for giving too little aid too late, while ignoring the institutions of indigenous society which would make a better job of distributing it. He suggests that aid

donors could do worse than follow the imperial practice of the British in using ethnographers to help draw on the social and cultural resources of local people. In these comments, I will summarize and discuss each paper, before ending with some general remarks on culture, poverty and development.

### **Abraham and Platteau      Participatory Development : Where Culture Creeps In**

Aid donors in poor areas increasingly bypass states in favour of local community associations and call it participatory development. They believe that they are promoting equity, democracy and sustainability. But successful community-based development would require "governance principles that comprise majority voting rules, exit options, free expression of opinions on the part of traditionally weaker or subjected groups, impartial sanctioning mechanisms and procedures, etc"

What the authors call the "institutional logic of tribal societies" is, however, starkly opposed to all that. This model of a close-knit community has evolved as a survival mechanism in the face of natural hazard and external threats. There is no separation of the personal and the social. Hence there is a "poisoning of the social climate" in which the pursuit of selfish ends is always seen as being harmful to the collective good. Private accumulation of wealth is anti-social and undermines collective security. Witchcraft accusations and redistributive pressures curb individual enrichment. Nor are these societies egalitarian: "a rigid hierarchy of ranks, based on age, gender and lineage, prevails..." They have some particularly harsh words for local chiefs. This is a culture built upon a worldview that is incompatible with modern economic growth. The objectives of participatory development depend on meeting the formal conditions of bureaucracy -- for elections, accounting, competent office-holders, uniform treatment, etc. Yet these are ignored in practice.

The authors' method is to construct an ideal type of weakly differentiated societies far removed from markets and economic opportunities. The relationship of this abstraction to historical African societies is debatable. But they move on to address African rural

societies that are so differentiated as a result of long-term integration into market economy. It seems that similar obstacles to participatory development may be found in peasant societies everywhere. They conclude by pointing out two dilemmas of participatory development. First, the time horizons and commitments of the donor agencies are inadequate for the slow process of institution-building needed. If local communities are to be actively involved, donors must engage with the weaker elements of society and not allow local elites to divert the benefits of aid. Second, by-passing the central state is self-defeating, since only a strong bureaucracy can override these same elites. "To curb the obnoxious influence of vested interests of local power-holders, a strong and effective central government must exist that is determined to confront the clientelism of rural areas in an environment rife with rent-seeking opportunities." Examples from Brazil, Bolivia, Jamaica and Kerala are enlisted in support of this claim.

"A genuine decentralization of administrative powers must take place in which local office-bearers with the requisite skills and expertise can support communities regardless of political affiliations. And to ensure that this condition is met, a vigilant civil society must exist, implying that, through enhancement of education and mass awareness-building campaigns, the grassroots come to know their rights as well as the duties and responsibilities of their leaders at all levels." This is clearly not going to happen in Africa soon. So what is needed is a modest interim programme of experimentation aimed at providing institutional support for both local communities and state structures.

I could dispute the method of this paper, suggesting that African social life is not well represented by the ideal type on view here. I could argue with the attempt to draw a line between 'tribal' and 'differentiated' (a.k.a. 'peasant') societies or to distinguish African cultures from similar phenomena elsewhere. I wonder how the political culture of Belgium or any other OECD country would fare against the attack on local elites launched here. But I would rather agree with the authors of this paper that Africans have generally not yet found the political forms of property and government capable of delivering a modicum of development. Moreover, such forms can only be devised with the collaboration of international agencies, since the roots of African weakness lie in the

world as a whole and not just in their specific circumstances. Abraham & Platteau accuse the donors of masking indifference with a democratic rhetoric that fails to grasp social realities. They see the African problem as cultural and in doing so fall into something of the same idealistic trap themselves. But all of their specific recommendations concern the need to institute practical social forms. It is not obvious what culture has to do with it. The world is not short of ideas; what we need is new social forms that work. Africans need them more urgently than most, but they should not be introspective about it.

### **Simon Harragin      Relief and an Understanding of Local Knowledge**

Capitalism is both creative and destructive. If one side of development aims at long-term economic growth, the other is more concerned with patching up the consequences of deprivation and neglect. The present paper is about aid relief in a particular context, Southern Sudan during a famine in 1998. Harragin is a trained anthropologist who spent over a year living as an ethnographer among the Dinka, as well as having worked with relief agencies in the region. He clearly takes the side of local people against the donors. The latter had their own ideas about who should receive food aid. These were individuals revealed to be vulnerable by evidence of malnutrition. They were reluctant to use local distribution methods, believing that these were corrupt and favoured the military. They gave more credence to territorial chiefs than to the kin groups which, according to Harragin, were the most effective means of reaching people in need. They used stereotypical notions about 'man-made famines' and 'dependency culture' to justify late delivery of inadequate supplies. They were only there because of humanitarian impulses, but in the end they fought a propaganda war to protect their own reputations back home.

It cannot have been easy to distribute food aid in a war zone where the starving were fighting their own national government and each other. But Harragin's description of an aid bureaucracy too wrapped up in its own bureaucratic imperatives to engage with local people is a very familiar one (since Judith Tandler's *Inside Foreign Aid*, 1978, for example). His claim that the proliferation of theories about famine has done little to improve famine relief in practice is worth investigating. Anthropologists have long

offered themselves as mediators or translators between bureaucracy and the people. What this study invites, with its explicit contrast between aid today and colonial administration yesterday, is an analysis of how such a gap might be mitigated in practice. For most ethnographers have almost as foreshortened a view of local society as development consultants. A year spent acquiring a child's mastery of the language is a poor substitute for a lifetime's immersion in local society and history. Perhaps recognizing this, some aid agencies have recruited ethnographers with long-term special knowledge of a region. But the district officers of the colonial Sudan often spent a decade or more in one place and were themselves among the anthropologists' best sources.

It may be that the twentieth century method of ethnography, the pretension to write about a people considered as a natural unit, is itself now an obstacle to development. I am not sure that aid workers would benefit more from knowledge of indigenous kinship institutions than from understanding regional history with some of the depth that the local inhabitants do. The present war has its roots in the late nineteenth century, when the British, Ottoman and Ethiopian empires all encroached on the Southern Sudan. The Nuer, made famous by Evans-Pritchard, conquered much of the region at this time, absorbing lesser peoples into a stateless association. E-P himself was forced to pitch his tent outside the Nuer villages since they were then engaged in a war with the British (who hired him as an ethnographer for this reason). The Dinka are not an isolated tribe, but a name for people who distinguish themselves from the Nuer in various ways. At different times, reflecting vagaries of national politics, each of the two has commanded a demographic majority in the region. They are now violently opposed to each other, as well as to the Muslim national government in Khartoum which has been waging war on them on and off for half a century. The Southern Sudan is still a cockpit of international intrigue. Apart from oil and the Christian/Islamic split, Museveni's inter-lacustrine Bantu cohorts, fresh from their American-backed exploits in Rwanda and the Congo, are now engaging with Sudan government forces supported by the French. And so it goes.

Both papers end up advocating something similar, despite the apparent contrast between their headlines. They want donor agencies to get more closely involved with the peoples

they claim to want to help. This should ideally require some critique of institutions on both sides. An example from Bulgaria in the 90s illustrates this point. At first all donors (the EU, their constituent members, the Americans, the World Bank) threw money at the country and told them to get a market economy. Nothing happened. Eventually the Germans arranged for lower-echelon staff on both sides to meet and work out precise institutional arrangements for making and supervising loans. Now all European donors use this method. It doesn't need cultural translators, although it does help to recognize that Bulgarian, Polish and Hungarian history are not the same. It just needs planned social interaction and time. Now both papers, in their constructive proposals, made little use of the idea of culture. Their anthropological method may well be equally flawed. The method of eclectic comparison allows for one-sided exaggeration at the expense of trying to grasp social complexity. The ethnographic present is probably too ahistorical to be useful in situations like the southern Sudan. We need methods that can reflect the interests sustaining an organization such as the World Bank, a concern with the world economy as a whole and its distinctive parts.

### **Some comments on culture, poverty and development**

It is worth reflecting on why culture should be on the development agenda at this time. The mechanization of brains has put cultural commodities (ideas) at the centre of world capitalism today: information services such as the media, entertainment and education. We need to ask how the inhabitants of African cities can participate in these developments, even more than how poor villagers there can eat. Cultural property (rather fancifully known as Intellectual Property Rights) is shaping up as the main focus of contestation in the key sectors -- software, music, film and TV, drugs, genetically modified foods etc. Struggles to redress economic inequality, not least inequality between the world's regions, are being fought over questions of culture. For example, do we have the common right to transmit song as we wish? Should legal transcripts be the commercial property of private firms?

Then governments and corporations in the western world are replacing the social forms of state capitalism with cultural forms of which community participation is one. The devolution of governance and fiscal responsibility to appointed, not elected bodies accompanies the shift to market provision of public goods and to outsourced production masked by the corporate logo. The notion of culture invokes exclusive local specificity, but the situation described for Africa can be seen everywhere, especially in the richer countries. Nor do politics there conform any more closely to abstract principles of democracy than in African villages. Is there anywhere in the world today where people are generally confident in the probity of their rulers? Everywhere we see the retreat of the state from universal provision and taxation, the revival of market liberalism, national vulnerability to transnational economic processes, devolution of responsibility to NGOs and QUANGOs, a rhetoric of community participation to replace both central and local government. These are social symptoms of a trend in world civilization; and before we highlight cultural differences, we would do well to confront the general case.

When society fails or does not yet exist, cultures are enrolled to do the job. Thus the Germans formed a political society by first mobilizing their culture within a framework of market unification. As Elias pointed out, these cultural principles differed substantially from those of French society, heir to Enlightenment civilization. The difference in approach between British and American anthropology used to be attributed to institutional conditions. The British practiced social anthropology because the African and Pacific peoples they studied still had viable societies and society back home was highly corporate. The Americans practiced cultural anthropology partly because of strong German influence, but mainly because the indigenous societies had been smashed, leaving only cultural remnants, and the restless mobility of a continental people had not yet formed a coherent society.

When Oscar Lewis identified a 'culture of poverty' in Central America and the Caribbean, he argued that poor people everywhere built up their own cultural defenses against the predations of liberal capitalism and corrupt politics. Unfortunately this culture reproduced their poverty and he wanted to break it by means of a state socialism such as

was then found in Castro's Cuba. He did not imagine that a process of popular mobilization and education would succeed without political controls on capitalist markets and accumulation. Jean-Philippe has offered a version of this, except that he may have exaggerated the cultural specificity of African villagers and he has no recipe for strengthening states faced with the universal ascendancy of liberal capitalism today. At the time of independence, almost fifty years ago, African states paid too little attention to the global context when devising their own political plans. The same could be said of South Africa more recently. If Africans are to break out of economic backwardness soon, it will be because of forces common to the rest of the world at least as much as their own local efforts.

Clearly there is a difference between aid relief and the promotion of development. Identifying the cultural dimensions of both processes has intellectual merit. I would suggest, however, that we remember always to juxtapose culture and society when analyzing development..