

The anthropology of development: bureaucracy vs the people?

'Development' is the uneven growth of capitalism in two centuries of machine revolution, but more often it concerns making good the damage incurred by such a process. Since the second world war, development has been one name for the relationship between rich and poor countries; but the goal of improving the latter's economies has been tacitly abandoned for more than two decades when the income drain from debt interest has far outweighed the value of aid. Beyond that lies the unresolved question of bureaucracy and the people.

Ordinary lives have long been overridden by bureaucratic planning recipes which could not accommodate the real interests and practices of people on the ground. In a climate of neo-liberalism this observation could be assimilated to a critique of the state, the core of bureaucratic order. Consequently states have often been by-passed as corrupt and ineffective, their place taken by business corporations and non-government organizations. But NGOs are driven by even stronger bureaucratic imperatives than many government agencies, because of their dependence on public opinion back home. Aid bureaucracies are always more accountable to head office than to local needs and circumstances. The multilateral agencies too, who took it on themselves to co-ordinate development, have constantly struggled with the contradiction between their bureaucratic nature and the desire to stimulate self-organized human initiatives whose impulses are inevitably stifled by remote controls. The World Bank's devotion to concepts like 'the informal sector' and 'social capital' testifies to this need to bridge the unbridgeable.

The anthropologists entered this scene in the 1960s and after. They brought with them a method of long-term immersion in fieldwork, an ideology of joining the people where they live and a general hostility to numeracy, literate records and all the techniques of bureaucracy. They were asked, usually at short notice and for curtailed periods, to fill in the human dimension of development as a complement to the dominant work of the economists and the engineers,. But they had the people card to play and that was the Achilles heel of the bureaucracy. They could always claim the authenticity of proximity to the people on the ground. ("I have been there and you haven't"). They soon found out that they were in the middle of a war between bureaucracy and the people. They could take up one of three positions. They could inform on the people for the benefit of the bureaucracy. They could take the people's side as advocates for their interests. Or they could try to sit on the fence as mediators, offering interpretations of the people to the bureaucracy and of the bureaucracy to the people. The last of course was the one most compatible with the discipline's tradition of selecting adherents with a romantic vocation for the role of lone ranger in exotic places. As individualists, their natural position was in the gaps between all and sundry.

A subdiscipline, the anthropology of development, arose seeking to formalize the involvement of anthropologists in development bureaucracies. Techniques like Rapid Rural Appraisal were embraced as inevitable, whatever violence they did to fieldwork traditions. At the same time some anthropologists advanced a post-structuralist critique of

development, claiming that it was just a way of preserving a situation where the rich got richer, while the poor got poorer. But, rather than dismissing all bureaucracy out of hand as a tool of the powerful, we should ask how to incorporate the perspective of the people into what is done on their behalf, how to make development more democratic.

Consider an earlier effort to confer the benefits of the modern state on 'peasants'. Chayanov examined the internal organization of peasant economy in order to develop policy prescriptions that he believed would be in their interest. Some of these -- co-operatives, technical inputs, marketing supports etc -- were implemented most effectively in Scandinavian countries, notably Denmark. But the example demonstrates that a state governing in the interests of the people, with the help of good communications and advice, can make bureaucracy work for their economic benefit. After all the goal of impersonal institutions was originally to provide equal access under the law. People were fed up with everything being a question of who you know. They wanted to be free of feudal mafias, to live by rules that treated everyone the same. If the consequence of this was another kind of despotism, we should not throw out the baby with the bath water and go for a simple-minded anarchism which cannot by itself address the problems of global civilization.

There is therefore a fourth option for anthropologists who wish to engage with development. We could participate in attempts to make ours a less unequal world, by working in bureaucracies of various kinds and by joining the people where they live. In this way we might help to make rule by office more democratic while performing public services beyond the means of most self-help organizations on the ground.

Keith Hart
hart_keith@compuserve.com
www.thememorybank.co.uk