

ANTHROPOLOGY TO THE RESCUE: HOAX AND REALITY IN DEVELOPMENT STUDIES

Peter C. W. Gutkind
University of Warwick

«Anthropology began with a commitment to utilize research
in the solution of human problems».

Schensul & Stull (1987: 1)

«The history of anthropology of the past twenty years can be
aptly described as a saga of continuig crisis».

Llobera (1987: 105)

Let me begin by stating where I stand *vis-à-vis* that rather murky arena of "development studies" both at the level of theory and ideology, and at the practical level of programmes and service.

Those who know something of my interest might have noted that I have moved in a Marxian, if not exclusive Marxist, direction. When I now look back at the work I did in the early fifties in East Africa and compare this with both my research and teaching since the middle sixties, and certainly with what I am doing now, the change of orientation is significant. As I now look back at my graduate student days, I rather feel I was the victim, along with many others, of an approach to (social) anthropology which was really dead even then. I had very fine teachers but they did little to expose us to ideas and literature which were as important then as now. Perhaps it was the tense political climate of the cold war, that dissent was subversion, which prevented them from exposing us to conceptual alternatives. While my U.S. teachers may have felt politically constrained, those in Britain were mired in functionalism; our French colleagues slowly moved in more promising directions, while in the rest of Europe "modern" social anthropology simply did not exist.

I would like to believe that my decision to understand and apply Marxist approaches was not the consequence of having fal-

len prey to a fad, but the result of my assessment of the world we live in, how we have arrived at our present predicaments, and what ideas and structures seem to shape our future. I have come to the conclusion, at least for the present, that Marxism fits and illuminates our present condition far better than most everything else available to us despite the fact that Marxist theory is highly fragmented, and often bitterly contested, ranging from the more empirical tradition in England, the historical approaches in the U.S.A., and the complex structuralism (now in retreat) of our French colleagues. To this we must now add the attempts by Third World social scientists (among whom social anthropologists are a distinct minority) to fashion their own models and interpretations (1). I am certainly opposed to semantic gamesmanship often associated with such questions whether capitalism exists in Africa (or elsewhere in the Third World); whether we can identify a class system and class struggles (Gutkind 1983: 184-193). I believe that all these exist, indeed often in abundance, if we look carefully but avoid being father to the wish. Although much work still needs to be done, Marxist social anthropologists have already made a lasting contribution (Bloch 1983; Hakken & Lessinger 1987; Leacock 1982: 242-276). While we must still treat explanations with caution, the use of Marxist approaches allows us to ask more relevant and critical questions.

The questions social anthropologists should ask about "development" can best be conceptualised if informed by the approaches of social history – history from below. In recent times this field has promised a kind of intellectual renaissance likely to be important for the survival of social anthropology. Eric Hobsbawm has suggested that economic history (viewed as central to social history) concentrates on the «genesis and development of the present (capitalist) world economy and its transformations; or, more specifically, the genesis and development of the great industrial transformation of the past two centuries, sometimes misleadingly called "modernization"». Speaking primarily about the development and present condition of the historical sciences in England, he tells us that: «The number interested in the middle ages has tended to decline relatively; the number of those working on the 19th and 20th centuries [has expanded] enormously; and [those] dealing with the 16-18th centuries, fortunately hold up rather well» (Hobsbawm 1974: 74). While Hobsbawm is critical of what he calls the "cliometrics" approach to economic history, its dependence on quantification of the economic and «the value

of statistical evidence», he does not altogether reject it *a priori*. If the use of statistical techniques and evidence «have any practical application, it is to the present and future when choices can still be made; not to the past, when they have already been made for good». Social history on the other hand does not confine itself to statistical and quantitative analysis because, as Hobsbawm insists, «The study of man in society by definition embraces all human behaviour, including the economic. Social history and cliometrics are qualitatively different» (Hobsbawm 1974: 75).

While the approach and methods of social history appear somewhat free-floating, what is relevant to its definition and contribution is, in Hobsbawm's view, that it «has so far managed pretty well with only approximate theoretical guidance (largely, but not exclusively, from Marx), because much of its work is inspired, directly, by experiences and problems of the present, which plainly raise questions central to an understanding of society» (Hobsbawm 1974: 75). To this I would add that our understanding particularly of the poor world (the so-called underdeveloped nations) demands the most rigorous documentation and analysis of events, processes and structures which have contributed to the present dreadful state of affairs prevailing among this huge slice of humanity. But to achieve this understanding, if policies and strategies of transformation are to be even minimally effective, we must not assume that the application of the methodology and orientation of social history is some sort of conceptual panacea. Social history, while it may well provide «a framework for any kind of history; or for that matter, ideally, the historical dimension of any kind of social science», must avoid the pressure of «professional institutionalisation which breeds esoteric triviality, superficial borrowing from other disciplines, and an excess of technical discussion» (Hobsbawm 1974: 76). Thus social history is a particular kind of perception of reality, without being a "specialism". With this in mind let us now turn to another relevant issue in development studies, that of micro and macro levels of analysis.

Much social anthropology, past and present, reveals a constant disjuncture as it moves uneasily between micro-macro models typical of "mainstream" theory. Neither in Marxist theory nor in social history does such distinction exist, although great weight is attached to the careful study of the historical specific forces and structures over time and at any level of society. The great advantage of such models is that the so-called micro and macro are treated with equal magnitude. We merely need to cite some first-

class studies, all of which have so far stood the test of constant re-reading, attack and re-analysis, because they have not used this false and conceptually useless dichotomy (2). While we might all feel a little more comfortable working in what we perceive to be smaller units, the village, a neighbourhood, a single street or compound, or a particular ethnic group than to immerse ourselves in the complexity of larger units, the region, the nation, larger economic unions, the Third World as a whole and beyond (the now familiar world system), the fact remains that micro and macro today interact with each other in so complex a manner that their separation destroys reality. There will be those critics who at this point will sense some sort of Marxian functionalism. This is, of course, nonsense. Marxist theory concentrates on conflict and change and totally rejects equilibrium theory – the very hallmark of functionalism. The unity of micro and macro analysis is a particular challenge to anthropologists who, in the words of the late Max Gluckman «are reared on the rural tradition of the tribe» to be read and understood, I assume, as a micro unit while villages are then by definition mini-micro units. While today many development and applied anthropologists have looked beyond this confining limitation, a wider perspective has still to take root in our discipline as a whole. We are reminded again of the words of Gluckman that «an African townsman is a townsman» and «an African miner is a miner» (Gluckman 1961: 69). That view, which I think is essentially correct, suggests a great deal more than is conveyed by the simplicity of these words. It tells us that a Scottish or Russian miner has much in common with his African or Bolivian counterpart; that a *favela* dweller in Lima faces much the same conditions as those in the *bidonvilles* of Kinshasha. But what is even more important, behind these words, by virtue of this conceptualisation, there stand far more complex structures such as a system of labour, resources, capital accumulation, ideologies, competition and conflict, complex processes of urbanisation and distinct urbanisms, all imported by local events. To concentrate on something called a micro unit, as many social anthropologists continue to do, is simply an abstraction of little potential. Perhaps all this is an unacceptable determinism; to me it is fact. But much so-called micro analysis, a methodology more appropriate to the biological sciences, can so easily sink to the level of trait listing – and that, of course, has no longer a place in social anthropology.

The use of Marxist theory applied to the study of contemporary problems faced by the nations of the Third World has in my

opinion greatly enhanced its intrinsic value and importance particularly for the perceptive theoretician and those "experts on the loose" – the development practitioners who have not been totally captured by their altruistic objectives and confused liberalism. Whatever the problems and issues which pain the masses of the poor nations, they rotate predominantly around the specific nature of, and the degree to which capitalist enterprise, structures, and logic, have penetrated a vast range of societies and nations.

Of considerable interest at present is the concept of "articulation", namely how older forms (which could of course be capitalist) and newer structures intermingle or maintain an uneasy relationship *vis-à-vis* each other. This says no more than that the social formations of all Third World societies and nations are now enormously complex. Again, we can ask questions, while the answers may not always satisfy. But the interest reaches deeper and further back than contemporary societies. Marxist-oriented social anthropologists, historians, political scientists, and archaeologists are just as interested in a new look, as it were, at Ancient Egypt, the Incas, Greece and Rome as they are in the contemporary peasantry of Mexico, class consciousness among Africa's urban unemployed, the one-party state in Tanzania, rural development in the Ivory Coast or child labour in Nigeria. What all these interests have in common is the need to apply historical approaches, i.e. that antecedents are important in our understanding of the present. This is not to suggest for a moment, as some observers are tempted to feel (for example that primordiality and tribalism have bred stagnation), that history has stood still, that the peasants of northern India in the Moghul empire of the 16th and 17th centuries have their counterpart today. We know this is not so. But we can also detect that older and more recent forms of economic and political life are articulated in complex ways. Indeed, it is exactly this complexity which has also destroyed such cherished concepts as tradition and modernity, and the still popular notion of duality which contrasts pre-capitalist structures of production with those based on finance or industrial capital.

Taking this line a step further, close attention is now being given to the study of class formation, past and present, and the labour process. Here, too, as with questions of capitalist penetration, semantic obfuscation – and its companions cognitive analyses and semiotics – all too frequently displace careful historical treatment. The question is not whether classes and class struggles, such as in industrial society, exist in Africa, but rather what kind

of class manifestations are clearly evident as a consequence of the control and/or ownership of the resources and the means of production not by the masses but an aggressive bourgeoisie. That African labour has been sharply commoditised under colonialism, and the neo-colonial present, is surely not in doubt even among those most sceptical about the application of Marxist theory. Whether Third World workers are subsistence producers, cash-crop farmers, petty commodity producers (in the so-called "informal sector"), or wage workers is just one evidence of the commoditisation of labour. Their own social reproduction is in many cases dependent on surplus production for a market. Thus, what is more central is that labour is subordinate to a particular structure and logic over which it has very little control – at least at this juncture. But here, too, all too many development anthropologists, working with conventional models, seem to suffer some sort of intellectual amnesia when they ignore or play down a long history of rural and urban labour protest fathered by the exploitative nature of colonial and neo-colonial capitalism. True enough, to date a small percentage of Third World workers work in the formal wage sector, a smaller percentage still work in heavy industry such as mining, as dock labourers or steelmaking. But what is more important is the massive movement of these workers to towns and cities in search of employment on either a permanent basis or as a supplement to agricultural work. This labour migration is far ahead one of the most significant features of the present Third World scene. Attempts to arrest it by means of an endless variety of rural development schemes have almost always failed. While in the past this migration of so-called "free labour" was often subject to brutal recruitment methods, or forced labour, today it is said to be voluntaristic; yet a closer look reveals that rural poverty, and the involutory attack by urban-based capitalism on the productive potential of the rural areas, is in all respects as coercive as the conditions imposed on Africans since the early days of formal empire.

Let me now turn to the ideology of development. I must start with the view that development policies and strategies are predicated on the prevention of the very objectives sought leading to a take-off into sustained poverty. This is the consequence of the harmony of interest and common objectives of the developers, their supporters and agents and not least among the local elites through whom development is filtered and supposedly implemented. Development, whatever it might mean, simply does

not touch the masses. Under the disguise of generating local initiative and opportunity, capitalist logic and objectives are infused; market systems are established over which the producers are allowed little control. Much so-called development is ruthlessly from the top down when it should be from the bottom up (but even then success is easier to assume than achieve). True enough, we have learned a great deal, but what is rather more important is not the technique of development but the ideology which informs the objectives and purpose, both overt and hidden, and the context of this ideology within the present dominant economic system.

Here we must ask what has been the historic place of the Third World within that dominant economic system of capitalism, and what is the place of the poor nations today? Regarding the past, the answer is not too complicated. Whatever one's political leanings it is surely difficult to escape the conclusion that the colonial world, indeed even before the imposition of formal empire and imperialism, provided the industrial world with the resources (including slavery) which were required to fuel its rapid rise to power and hegemony. The terms, conditions and structures under which this took place were hardly based on a contract between equals. The old western world, later joined with enthusiasm by the new world of North America, needed markets for its enormous production potential and even an outlet for its own surplus production, its own reserve armies of workers. There is precious little evidence that anything has changed. Assiduously, most western nations, aid givers and a new breed of social anthropologists working for various agencies, have managed to bore their way into the economic and political fabric of most of the Third World nations. By design or sheer ignorance their well-funded projects do not result in trade on more equal terms, or the more equal distribution of wealth and social justice. Instead the developers work to cultivate local elites who will assist them to "modernise", to "westernise", and prevent autonomous development. As poverty bites more deeply, and guns replace necessities, the masses of the world's poor have to eat cake!

The development practitioners, social anthropologists among them, are a special breed. The range of their ideology spans from radicalism to unashamedly imperialistic objectives. Every western government has its various aid, Research and Development and consultancy organisations, so has the UN and its various specialised agencies; so have all the major universities in many countries,

west and east. Anthropologists have always been involved in this game – for game it is – as experts of all disciplines and technical skills sprinkle benevolence and good will among the needy and powerless often oblivious to what Pierre Jalée called *The pillage of the Third World* (1968).

Most ideologies of development profess a liberal tradition, an altruistic perspective and commitment – particularly among social anthropologists. Most development plans are sincerely advanced to touch however modestly the etiology of poverty, reduce early death rates, improve agriculture, expand education, improve urban and rural housing, and tackle those cultural factors which are said to be an impediment to change such as caste in India where millions cows seem more sacred than people. Most development experts know that change comes but slowly, that there are an infinite variety of barriers and hurdles which stand in the way and may never be crossed. Most experts know, or have more recently learned, that language skills are important and that only long residence can lead to understanding. Unfortunately most development experts have some sort of faith in research which in most cases means – when in doubt do a survey! More serious yet is the view that reformist approaches are all that most of them hope for.

The latest ideology of development spawned by social anthropologists, is “Social impact analyses”. On the surface, this distinctly American social science approach to “progress” seems simple and intelligent. It would seem to mean little more than what many have known for a rather long time, that if one wants to introduce new ideas, structures and technologies, one had better proceed with caution as the consequences might be detrimental and lead to resistance. Such caution clearly makes sense and is good advice to those technical experts who all too often feel that if those so and so natives would just let us get on with our purely technical tasks then their babies would not die from gastroenteritis before they are one year old; or that the road to be built so that the farmers can get their produce to the markets, and thus create an infrastructure which will generate local initiative and income, is impeded because of some ancient system of land tenure that those so and so natives refuse to give up.

The ideology of “Social impact” or “Social soundness analyses” is best revealed in the unbelievable obfuscating language it uses. Not long ago at a conference of anthropologists a paper was presented by a member of our profession who had extensive in-

volvement with the U.S. Agency of International Development. The paper contained a language and concepts (I am sure the author would consider them serious concepts) which left some of the listeners with a very heavy headache. To wit: "Feedback evaluation mechanism", "Social soundness analyses", "Benefit incidence of a project", "Power and development planning participation patterns", "Primary health care support project identification document", "Country development strategy statement", and a very mysterious "Reddin's management style diagnosis test". The author concluded that his work had «been an important growth experience for me. Not only do I understand anthropology better, but I can now apply its principles better» (Warren 1980). At that point the room began to empty, yet the author went on to give this picture of anthropology's understanding of various cultures and hence its potential usefulness in development projects. What follows seems to me to illustrate not only the pathology of professionalisation (Mills 1943: 165-180), but an ideology which we might call: Anthropology to the rescue. Let me quote a significant passage.

«The anthropological field experience with a specific culture leads us into an approach which transcends many other disciplines as we investigate economic, political, social, cultural, ecological, and psychological phenomena within the culture. We frequently have an in depth knowledge of linguistics, and of emic and etic approaches and understanding of phenomena. We tend to be fluent in a wide variety of languages, both Western and non-Western, with a finely tuned appreciation of communication models and strategies, intra- and inter-ethnic, intra- and inter-disciplinary, as well as communication through organization. We have the capacity to understand the culture of an ethnic group, the culture of a discipline, as well as the culture of a bureaucracy, and we have the capacity to act as facilitators of communication between change agents and client populations. We understand territoriality and the behaviors which emerge from it. We have the techniques and skills to formalize indigenous knowledge systems and to explain to change agents from technical fields such as soil science or medicine in what ways these systems may or may not be isomorphic with comparable Western knowledge systems. We have a strongly developed sense and appreciation of history, of the change process, and of the mechanisms which enhance the adoption and diffusion of innovations. We have experience in using a wide

variety of qualitative and quantitative methodologies in a wide variety of field situations and cultural contexts. Finally, we have had personal field experience in living in remote areas, and in dealing with the psychological effects of moving in and out of other cultures» (Warren 1980).

If these are the aims of contemporary social anthropology, then the question asked by Peter Worsley (1966: 121-129) «The end of anthropology?» might now be answered. Likewise, Audrey Richards (1961: 3-10), asking a similar question, titled her article "Anthropology on the scrap-heap?".

I do not know whether this new aberration of "Social impact analyses" has a future. One would like to assume that its birth contained a toxin leading to a quick death. We should not belabour the point; as in fashions there is little to account for such social science monstrosities. The less said the better. But in a more serious vein this most recent development should compel us to return and re-read some of the sharp critiques which have appeared in the last few years which, had they been taken seriously, might have prevented the birth of this confused liberalism in our profession (3).

The objections raised by many colleagues in our profession are, of course, manifold (particularly those who cling with a fierce tenacity to ethnology, while in much of Europe ethnography is still of primary interest), and some of their critique is often justified as there is good and bad Marxist scholarship (Friedman 1974: 444-469). (Here let me add that the Althusserian version reached a very high level of abstraction and as such seems to me almost totally divorced from praxis). The fundamental objections raised are often based on the premise that Marxists propagate an economic determinism and ignore the cultural, the cognitive, the semi-otic.

The ideology of development reflects the ideology of the anthropologist; the ideology of professionalism; the ideology of careerism; the ideology of intellectuals who admit to a humanistic tradition while the praxis of humanism is beneath their professionalism. A.G. Frank had these words of advice for anthropologists:

«His responsibility is to use anthropology only as far as it is sufficient, while doing whatever is necessary to replace the nearly worldwide violent, exploitative, racist alienative capitalist class system, which embraces most anthropologists and the people they study» (1969: 137).

Such a prescription is not easy to follow for anthropologists who consider themselves men and women of science and as such have effectively divorced themselves from the kind of participation which might just contribute to the overthrow of conditions which have brought us to the very brink of extinction. Let us take note of what Chomsky had to say.

«There is no need to explain why a movement of protest, radical political actions and resistance has arisen. The real question is why so few join it. The answer, no doubt, is that they do not join because they have a stake in the maintenance of the social order, and they do not want their well-being threatened» (1981: 185).

Those who work in development are often the most active agents of antimodernism. The big aid agencies work within the framework of western political and economic objectives. Anthropologists who participate in various programmes will no doubt deny that they are the active agents of such a purpose. But how can they escape entrapment? I am not saying that there are not among development practitioners and theoreticians men and women of radical persuasion and even intent. But they are clearly in a minority. The practitioners of "Social impact analyses" are surely of no such persuasion, for no radical thinker would ever succumb to work with "Feedback evaluation mechanisms" or "Reddin's management style diagnosis tests", approaches which make even 19th century ethnography a model of clarity. Anthropologists are not without compassion and a sense of social responsibility, without a sense of ethical conduct and immortal values. But they are, like most of us, intellectuals and that is a heavy burden to bear. Let us again note what Chomsky told us, this time in 1967.

«Intellectuals are in a position to expose the lies of government, to analyse actions according to their causes and motives and often hidden intentions. In the western world at least, they have the power that comes from political liberty from access to information and freedom of expression. From a privileged minority, western democracy provides the leisure, the facilities, and the training to seek the truth lying hidden behind the veil of distortion and misrepresentation, ideology, and class interest through which the events of current history are presented to us» (1967: 18).

I have yet to see that our profession as a whole is committed

to exposing the very system which has fathered all of us. True enough, many colleagues have used their energy to fight genocide, ethnocide and the brutality borne by the powerless and the oppressed. But that is simply not enough.

Perhaps we can conclude as follows. Anthropologists should continually critique conceptualisations used and the consequences of their activities – particularly that breed known as development anthropologists – so that they do not accept theories and ideologies in a generally passive manner. They must combine action with reflection on that action. They ought to try and combine their dedication with a far clearer understanding of the kind of world in which we all live.

The implications are clear. They indicate that it is absurd and inadequate to continue pretending that we anthropologists are gifted with special abilities. From the beginning the general conditions of the culture in which we live, the very language we speak, impose upon us a way of thinking and working, assumptions about the world which are reflected in our models. Anthropologists are no exception. We often reject all manifestations of elitism, ethnocentrism, capitalist objectives, and the perversion that professionalism must be rewarded financially. Perhaps the most debilitating characteristic of the conventional anthropologist is the belief in “objectivity” which reveals the depth of the confusion about reality. The anthropologist should not only direct development interests toward the chosen objective, but should more seriously reflect upon himself to double back on practice and theory and judge them according to the conditions in which they were formed and why they were accepted. The prerequisite for development anthropology is not in the first instance its practice, what to do and what to avoid; the real prerequisite is to clear the cobwebs hiding reality. And this can only be achieved if and when we discover who we are and what we have done in the past. The “objects” we have studied in the past are now the makers of their history. Development and applied anthropology have yet to accept this fundamental fact.

Notes

1. Barongo (1983); Nzimiro (1973: 67-83); Onoge (1973: 325-345); Ortiz (1971: 11-14); Pala (1974: 107-124); P'Bitek (1971); Temu & Swai (1981).
2. For evidence, read the work by Braudel, Bloch, Ladurie, Genovese, Hobsbawm and E. P. Thompson.

3. I am thinking of the work by such colleagues as Jack Stauder, Bernard Magubane, Bob Scholte, Omeo Onoge, Monday Ekpo, Bridget O'Laughlin, David Goddard, Kathleen Gough and the editors of such journals as *Critique of Anthropology*, *Dialectical Anthropology* and, for Africa, the *Review of African Political Economy* and the recent arrival the *Journal of African Marxists*. Even such more established journals such as *African Affairs* (the organ of a very conservative body – the Royal African Society founded in memory of that arch paternalist Mary Kingsley) and the *Journal of Modern African Studies* are edging their way to a more critical and challenging perspective. It is not only that these authors, and these journals, bring us a quite different orientation and purpose, but we become immersed in a far sharper analytical presentation which brings to light events, experiences and hard empirical data which we have either completely ignored or reduced in their true significance.

Sommario

Una dura critica all'approccio definito "Analisi dell'impatto sociale" o "Analisi del benessere sociale", sorto recentemente nel campo dell'antropologia dello sviluppo, è avanzata da Gutkind in questo saggio.

L'autore considera lo "sviluppo", a cui con confuso liberalismo si rivolge l'interesse degli antropologi, estraneo alle masse beneficiarie. La logica capitalistica e gli obiettivi capitalistici sono mascherati sotto iniziative e opportunità locali. Condanna quindi l'ideologia dello sviluppo che finora ha ispirato gli obiettivi delle politiche di sviluppo adottate nel Terzo Mondo e denuncia il coinvolgimento degli antropologi, quali professionisti dello sviluppo, in questo "gioco". Addirittura aberrazioni sono definite dall'autore i concetti proposti dall'"Analisi dell'impatto sociale", ultimo prodotto di quell'ideologia dello sviluppo che egli ulteriormente condanna in quanto riflette l'ideologia del professionalismo, del carrierismo, dell'intellettualismo di falsa tradizione umanistica.

Gutkind propone quindi di affrontare i problemi relativi allo sviluppo dei paesi del Terzo Mondo con una prospettiva radicalmente diversa, attraverso cioè concettualizzazioni e metodologie proprie della storia sociale. Solo l'approccio della storia sociale con impostazione marxista permette una valutazione ed un'analisi degli effetti dell'incorporazione di paesi a basso reddito in un sistema complesso dominato dal capitalismo. Solamente adottando un orientamento storico sociale si può far luce su questi importanti problemi, offuscati invece da modelli come le "Analisi di impatto sociale", garantendo inoltre la sopravvivenza dell'antropologia altrimenti destinata a scomparire.