
David Lewis and David Mosse (eds.), *Development Brokers and Translators: The Ethnography of Aid and Agencies*, Bloomfield, Connecticut, Kumarian Press Inc., 2006. xv+251pp.

This collection of studies, *Development Brokers and Translators*, provides a very substantial and worthwhile resource for practising developmentalists and anthropologists alike. The ten chapters examine such material as rural development planning in Niger, land rights codification in Benin, ethno-nationalism and the politics of development in Malaysia, the challenges of understanding and building civil society in Vietnam, ethnographic research carried out by a South African NGO, rationalizing agricultural development practices and representations in India, “bracketing differences” in Nepalese NGO work as well as the conflicting demands of environmentalism and “development” in both Malaysia and Brazil. Altogether, the cases constitute a rich, insightful and globally diverse array of experience. The common thread is the field of development and the critical issues that arise

from imperfect and sometimes compromised practice.

The collected articles are all by anthropologists, mostly university-based academic researchers but include a couple of others, one freelance writer and the other an employee of a major British NGO. All have significant practical field experience and are obviously well equipped to write with well-grounded knowledge and insight.

“Translation” often results in subverting the expression of community needs to make them conform to the policies and priorities of national governments, international donors, implementing agencies, intermediary NGOs and so on. Development activity, as a consequence of the “translation”, becomes something other than what villagers might originally have hoped or intended. Thus, the process of “translation” means more than simply explaining needs and aspirations of potential beneficiaries to other audiences and becomes satisfying what donors are equipped, within their official policy constraints, to understand and to be prepared to finance. The authors have quite masterfully demonstrated what happens through each of the cases presented.

The book’s editors have boiled down to three the major forms of interface or engagements between anthropology and development (pp. 2-5). These they characterize as “instrumentalist” (the work of researchers, consultants, managers and bureaucrats), “populist” (emphasizing participative forms of research and writing while rejecting extractive ones) and “deconstructivist” (analyzing development as “discourse”). Regardless of the use to which the discipline is put, the editors and the authors claim a common ground of interest between anthropological scholarship and development practice wherein each can constructively inform the other.

Certain key terms are worth mentioning here. These will be clear, no doubt, to professional anthropologists as tools of the trade. The editors define “brokerage”, as

. . . a longstanding theme in political anthropology in which structural-functionalist models have been challenged by work . . . highlighting the ways in which social actors operate as active agents building social, political and economic roles rather than simply following normative scripts (p. 11)

. . . brokerage is required by the co-existence of different rationalities, interests and meanings, so as to pro-

duce order, legitimacy and “success” and to maintain fund flows (p 16).

The definition which the editors provide for “translation” is this: “translation refers to mutual enrolment and the interlocking of interests that produces project realities” (p.13). While this definition might have been somewhat expanded, the actual case studies presented considerably elucidate the meaning and, thus, facilitate the reader’s task. The chapters offer some good examples of what “translation” means within the conflicting pressures of real life development practice. Sometimes, “translation” is a matter of *force majeure*!

The term “ethnography” which appears in the title is also central to the editors’ purposes. In their first paragraph, they have this to say:

The starting point for this book is the premise that ethnographic research can provide policy makers and aid managers with valuable reflective insights into the operations and effectiveness of international development as a complex set of local, national and cross-cultural social interactions . . . an anthropology of development is inextricably an anthropology of contemporary Africa, Latin America and Asia (p. 1).

By and large the ten articles speak with clarity to the essential concepts and purposes of the book. Any unevenness is to be expected in collections written by a variety of authors, each covering somewhat different ground. Readers will, however, be greatly assisted by the cross-referencing of articles that has been provided by these very attentive authors and editors.

If any fault is to be found, it would be that terminology may sometimes be a little opaque. The definitions of the central concepts might have been made a little clearer for the benefit of readers outside the discipline, thus rendering this very insightful and valuable collection of articles more accessible to a broader audience of development practitioners.

While rigorously critical in their analyses of the development interventions they are examining, appropriately so, the authors of the studies are not unsympathetic to the real constraints faced by the actors involved. It is important to add this fact because it is what makes their critiques not only interesting theoretic-

cally but also useful. A good example is the chapter “Brokering Fair Trade: Relations Between Coffee Co-operatives and Alternative Trade Organizations – A View from Costa Rica” (pp. 127-148). The chapter’s author presents a clear analysis of the difficulties confronted by those pursuing fair and just trading relationships within the context of the prevailing international economic system but goes on to make a point of acknowledging the importance of the moral and ethical imperative which informs the fair trade movement.

Lawrence S. Cumming

Consultant in International Development and Civil Society
Ottawa, Ontario, Canada
