

## REVIEW ARTICLE

## Development between nuance and neo-liberalism

*Bram Büscher*

*David Mosse*, *Cultivating development: An ethnography of aid policy and practice*. London: Pluto Press, 2005, 315 pp., 0-7453-1798-7.

*Tania M. Li*, *The will to improve: Governmentality, development, and the practice of politics*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007, 374 pp., 0-8223-4027-0 (paperback).

*Richard Sandbrook, Marc Edelman, Patrick Heller and Judith Teichman*, *Social democracy in the global periphery: Origins, challenges, prospects*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007, 289 pp., 0-521-68687-7 (paperback).

International development today is not a particularly nuanced affair. Its most visible protagonists are currently “aid celebrities,” such as Bono, Thomas Friedman, Bob Geldof, and Jeffrey Sachs, who believe that “an end to poverty” can be achieved through “compassionate consumption,” “trade not aid,” massive commodity spectacles, and “back-to-the-sixties” bulk investments (Biccum 2007; Richey and Ponte 2006). This fact alone makes the three nuanced accounts by David Mosse; Tania Li; and Richard Sandbrook, Marc Edelman, Patrick Heller, and Judith Teichman valuable and welcome contributions to the debate on development. In its own way, each book highlights contemporary issues concerning development and tries to contextualize, balance, and critically reflect on dominant interpretations and *modi operandi*.

David Mosse’s book *Cultivating development*, an outstanding ethnographic account of a flagship British aid project in India, has already

made a big impact in anthropological circles and beyond. This effect was triggered partly by the unusually strong objections to the book made by Mosse’s research subjects, who were also his colleagues for over 10 years in the “Indo-British Rainfed Farming Project,” which is the central focus of the book.<sup>1</sup> Mosse uses his comparative advantage as participant-insider in the project to develop a “complex, long-term, multi-sited and initially unintentional” (2005: ix) research narrative that captures and ethnographically dissects the inherent struggles and tensions in current-day “participatory” development. Struggles and tensions that few in development dare to openly acknowledge and, in fact, as Mosse convincingly shows, try to “conceal” behind “the veil of policy” (2005: 227). Development policy, so argues the book, “primarily functions to mobilise and maintain political support, that is to legitimise rather than to orientate practice” (2005: 14). This and four other propositions

about development policy and practice, form the book's central argument. Mosse inverts the relationship between policy and practice, demonstrating that "development projects work to maintain themselves as coherent policy ideas or systems of representations" (proposition three) that in actual fact are "not driven by policy but by the exigencies of organisations and the need to maintain relationships" (proposition two; 2005: 16f.). As such, development projects "do not fail," but "are failed by wider networks of support and validation" (proposition four), which makes "success" and "failure" "policy-oriented judgements that obscure project effects" (proposition five; 2005: 18f.).

This is not to say that development has no effects. Mosse upholds the accepted insight that development projects are renowned for their unintended side effects, but adds that even if there are intended project effects, these are only positively acknowledged if they (still) fit into the dominant policy model. Thus, the book shows in ethnographic detail how the Indo-British Rainfed Farming Project in its first phase (1992–1997) was considered "absolutely cutting edge" and "the jewel in the crown" (2005: 183) of British aid with little to show for in reality, whereas later in the second phase, when some positive local dynamics were starting to appear, the project no longer fitted the changed policy model and had started to be regarded as a failure (2005: 184–229). Mosse argues that the problem with development policy is that it "fabricates its separation from political economy and that it becomes isolated from the local or vernacular to which it is nonetheless materially connected" (2005: 238). As a result, this "produces ignorance of project effects" (2005: 238). It is these two processes "the fabrications and the 'downstream effects' of policy" (2005: 238) that can be better understood through ethnographic research. With *Cultivating development*, Mosse forcefully embraces and in fact sets the tone for a "new ethnography of development" that does away with "monolithic notions" (2005: 6f.) and simplistic dualisms and instead seeks the nuances of development policy and practice.

Another prominent proponent of this new ethnography of aid, or "aidnography," is Tania Murray Li. Her recent book, *The will to improve*, is also a major milestone in this field and is likely to resonate widely within (critical) development studies. Like Mosse, Li applies the ethnographic method to tease out the inherent contradictions and tensions in contemporary development, in her case in Indonesia. However, unlike Mosse, Li takes a broader and historical approach, analyzing recent "integrated conservation and development" interventions and a major World Bank project in the context of a two-century history of "betterment schemes." She begins her account when Dutch colonial rule commenced in earnest in Indonesia during the early nineteenth century and traces how earlier discourses and practices around "improving natives" resonate remarkably with improvement schemes in the post-colonial period. Much more so than Mosse, Li frames her analysis in the context of capitalist expansion and within an explicitly political-economic theoretical framework, combining insights of Marx, Gramsci, and Foucault. Especially the Foucauldian concept of governmentality—simplified: the mentality of government—plays a central role in the book. More precisely, the book seeks to "understand the rationale of improvement schemes—what they seek to change, and the calculations they apply," and their effects "as they intersect with other processes shaping particular conjunctions" (Li 2007: 1).

According to Li, "the will to improve" harbors several "deeply embedded" contradictions. Two are dominant in the book: first, that between the promotion of capitalist expansion and the "concern to improve the condition of the dispossessed" and second, "the way that programs of improvement designed to reduce the distance between trustees and deficient subjects actually reinscribe the boundary that positions them on opposite sides of an unbridgeable divide" (2007: 31). The book explains how in Indonesia these contradictions have characterized the interactions between subjects and self-appointed "trustees"; those "responsible" for the improvement of "natives" under Dutch rule, "primi-

tives” under the “New Order” of Suharto (from 1966 to 1998) and “communities” under recent integrated conservation/development and World Bank projects. Focusing on central Sulawesi in particular, Dutch missionaries aimed to convert “natives” through resettlement from remote up-hill areas to (coastal) villages; New Order bureaucrats sought to civilize “primitives” through similar means; and international and Indonesian NGO (non-governmental organization) staff wanted to combine the conservation of biodiversity in the Lore Lindu National Park<sup>2</sup> with local benefits by zoning, defining access rules to the park and its resources, providing “alternative livelihoods,” and attempts to inhibit a conservation ethic among locals (“to produce sets of aspirations appropriate to the project of biodiversity protection”; 2007: 196).

Though careful not to catalogue sequentially what are in fact very different socio-political dynamics and historical contexts, Li does point to certain rationales within improvement schemes that seem stubborn over time.<sup>3</sup> Most important is the issue of what she calls “rendering technical”: drawing boundaries within and rationalizing inherent social-political processes in manageable, technical terms. Relying on Ferguson’s work in Lesotho, another stubborn rationale that Li puts forward is that technical “practices of government” try to replace, yet are always compromised by “practices of politics.”

Although neither of these arguments is truly original, they are reinvigorated through the book’s historical perspective and its attempt to avoid the miserabilist trap of acknowledging local agency solely in terms of its domination by more powerful actors. Li, for example, relates how local people organized in the Free Farmers Forum resisted attempts aimed at their improvement by “proclaiming” a piece of “sovereign” territory within the National Park (2007: 156–191). Obviously, the aim was not so much the total escape from existing forms of rule—most people seemed to want some type of government intervention, as long as it was benign and beneficial. Rather, the forum’s action was a *political* response to technical governmentalities that were neither benign nor beneficial. Thus,

“dismal consequences” of improvement schemes are narrated “not to emphasise the highlanders’ position as victims, but to stress that their capacity for agency was the *product* of all this history” (2007: 228).<sup>4</sup> Interestingly, Li argues that even if “trustees” are aware of the contradictory political effects of capitalist development, like in the World Bank project, they do not act on them, keeping rather to technical governmental interventions.

This is not to say that the effects of all governmental interventions seeking development are indeed “dismal,” or so the authors of the third book would argue. *Social democracy in the global periphery* by Sandbrook, Edelman, Heller, and Teichman stands apart from the previous two books, but in its own way tries to nuance long-held beliefs about development in the South. Specifically, Sandbrook et al. aim to “show that opportunities exist to achieve significant social progress in the periphery, despite a global economic order that favors the core industrial countries” (2007: 3). They use comparative and historical qualitative political science to argue for a more nuanced understanding of the ability of “peripheral countries” to control and “domesticate” neo-liberalism and stimulate social equality. Using the Indian state of Kerala, and Costa Rica, Mauritius, and Chile as case studies, the book does a splendid job of demonstrating that social-democratic ideals of industrialization combined with democratization, active social citizenship, and class compromise that upholds redistributive measures is possible in countries with “particular (though not insurmountable) developmental challenges posed by peripherality within the global capitalist economy” 2007: 19).

It is clear that Sandbrook et al. use a very different entry point for studying development than the other two authors. Rather than ethnographically detailed accounts of the interaction between actor groups within the development configuration, theirs is a study of socio-economic and political aggregates within the historical context of three countries and one Indian state. Moreover, they study these within the explicit framework of global capitalist relations and the

ways in which richer social-democratic countries (especially from Western Europe) have been able to develop their systems. Thus, Sandbrook et al. discuss how the state of Kerala has been able to develop a more egalitarian and democratic society than the rest of India for three main reasons (2007: 67). First, the states “early commercialization” of agriculture transformed class relations such that they became conducive to democracy and state intervention. Second, a disciplined yet radical communist party won elections and initiated redistributive reforms. Third, class forces were such that radical elements remained constrained within a democratic system. Similar to Kerala’s situation within India, Costa Rica ranks much higher on international human development indexes than its Central American neighbors. The structural factors that led to this exception were the “relatively wide-spread access to land, a more-or-less shared worldview between the classes and a more equitable distribution of coffee benefits than in other countries” (2007: 95–96). This and a short civil war in the 1940s whereby the elite was “effectively left toothless” (2007: 100) brought Costa Rica on a “firm path” toward “consolidating a social-democratic developmental state.”

Again in contrast to “other African countries,” the third case study of Mauritius, an “underdeveloped and stratified country has achieved not only sustained growth, but a degree of equity, a remarkable welfare state, and a consolidated democracy” (2007: 123). Sandbrook et al. argue that for Mauritius to achieve a “miracle” despite extreme racial inequality, rapid population growth coupled with high unemployment, and a monocultural economy three “unusual structural conditions” applied. First, Mauritius treated land and labor as commodities from early colonial rule. Second, a “social-democratic compromise” ensued despite “class and ethnic divisions”; and third, Mauritius boasts an effective state, the foundations of which were established under British rule. But, so stress the authors, these structural factors alone were not sufficient. Conscious political choices and appropriate design of institutions further developed and consolidated the Mauritian social democratic “suc-

cess.” The last case study discussed forms an exception to the other three. Whereas Kerala, Costa Rica, and Mauritius are described as radical and classic social democracies, Chile is described as a “tumultuous third-way”: a “hybrid of neoliberal economics and social democracy” (2007: 147). The reason is Chile’s very radical socialism during the early 1970s and its dictatorship from 1973–1990, which followed as a reaction by the elite to restore their power over the state that started to seriously threaten their property. As a result Sandbrook et al. argue that the current democratic governments are constantly caught up in a delicate balancing act between older social-democratic tendencies and commitments to trade liberalization, privatization, and business’ access to the highest government levels established under the Pinochet dictatorship.

In analyzing the patterns and prospects of and the challenges to social-democracy in the global periphery, Sandbrook et al. come to several conclusions. The first one is especially interesting in comparison with Tania Li’s book, namely, that “social democracy is a response to capitalism: no capitalism, no social-democracy” (2007: 178). Whereas Li focuses on the contradictions of capitalism and the inability of intervention agents to effectively mediate its effects, Sandbrook et al. maintain that capitalism and commercialization are a necessary structural precondition for equitable social-democracy. The difference between the two is the level and method of analysis, a point to which we will return later. Another conclusion by Sandbrook et al. is the necessity of an active civil society and class compromise combined with an active state: “Social democracy requires an activist state that can both manage the delicate trade-offs of class compromises and extend the reach of the public domain without compromising its autonomy” (2007: 91). All of this has been severely challenged by neo-liberal globalization, but not only do the authors argue social-democratic regimes can “tame” these challenges, social-democracy even gives countries competitive advantages because of better infrastructure and a healthier and more productive workforce. Thus, the book concludes, the prospects for social-democracy look good;

the task now is to extend the “social conquests” made by the four case studies to other parts of the periphery.

In their respective fields, the three books are likely to make a big impact, if they have not already done so (Mosse). All three are thoroughly researched, well-written, and original. Both Mosse and Li set new ethnographic standards for the anthropology of development, whereas Sandbrook et al. challenge anthropology not to lose sight of patterns of development that might escape the ethnographic eye. These different approaches and theoretical associations, however, can also be used as a basis for more critical reflections. I will first discuss the issue of method, and second the way the texts deal with the issue of neo-liberalism.

### On method

As is clear from the preceding text, the main methodological difference among the books is the reliance on situated ethnography by Mosse and Li, whereas Sandbrook et al. use comparative historical analysis, focusing on the long-term structural rather than the more proximate configurational and conjunctural factors that led to social-democratic polities. In doing so, they explicitly frame the achievement of social-democracy as a success and state that they aim to “avoid negative tendencies” and help “search for possibilities” of social progress (Sandbrook et al. 2007: 3). This point is crucial in comparison with the other books. According to Mosse “the ethnographic question is not whether but *how* development projects work; not whether a project succeeds, but how ‘success’ is produced” (Mosse 2005: 8). Success becomes relative: It is left to the eye of the beholder. The reward is an immensely rich account of situated political practices by more concrete actors, rather than aggregates such as “class,” “state,” “civil society,” and so on. The downside might be exactly that: Success becomes relative. Hence, Li and Mosse might critique Sandbrook et al. for the very construction of what they say they want to explain by not extensively detailing the situated contradic-

tions that are undoubtedly present in the four cases,<sup>5</sup> whereas Sandbrook et al. might critique Mosse and Li for not being able to rise above situated practices and contradictions to acknowledge that some structural developments might be considered more positive than others (such as the existence of social-democracy in developing countries).

In a way, Li tried to counter this critique by taking a much more historical approach than Mosse, and by extending her analysis of the situated practices of Sulawesi to Indonesia as a whole. The added value of ethnography becomes thus: “contra scholars who separate the study of governmental rationalities from the study of situated practices, I have shown that close attention to the ‘witches’ brew’ offers insight into how governmental programs are configured by the very forces they would contain” (Li 2007: 282). This point might well be the most serious shortcoming of Sandbrook et al.’s analysis, as I will show below. Yet, despite this tremendous added value of ethnography, its weaker point is that it is often not clear what decisions are made to present what issues—and therefore which ethnographic details are left out that might have taken the analysis in a different direction. Li (2007: 28) states that “an ethnographic study is always selective.” Yet, exactly how these selections are made she does not mention, which in fact might be her very aim: “focus and selection are necessary in order to make an argument, but I have endeavored not to reduce complexity or force everything neatly into a fixed framework. Rather, I see the specifics of my various study sites, their untidiness, as a provocation that enables me to put pressure on the conceptual repertoire I have adopted and confront theory with the world it would explain” (Li 2007: 29f.). Without explicitly mentioning this, Mosse would certainly agree.

The overarching theme here is still that the choice of method deeply affects the outcome of the research. Li and especially Mosse placed themselves in the “witches’ brew,” where they had to participate and take a position in the nuts and bolts of (local, extra-local, and multi-level) politics. Sandbrook et al. stayed away from this level of involvement, which provided the chance

to look at the larger structural processes that are being shaped. The issue of which choice of method arguably has the most profound effect, as far as the conclusions of the three books is concerned, is that of neo-liberalism.

### On neo-liberalism

Although all three books are critical of neoliberalism (Mosse less explicitly so), they differ in one crucial aspect: Sandbrook et al. see neo-liberalism and capitalism<sup>6</sup> as a necessary “evil” for the development of the social-democratic good, whereas Mosse and especially Li see neo-liberalism as an intrusive, self-reinforcing process that leaves continuous contradictions in its wake (e.g., between development and dispossession). In fact, according to Li, the ones pushing for this system come to *embody* the contradictions. Both viewpoints have merit, yet both can also be criticized, depending on how one defines neoliberalism. In fact, I argue that this might be the main criticism against all three books: none clearly defines neo-liberalism and none seems to take into account neo-liberalism’s more contemporary forms and phases. Following authors such as Kovel (2002), Harvey (2005), and others, I define contemporary neo-liberalism as an explicitly global project aimed at establishing a social order that is embedded within the sphere and rules of the market.<sup>7</sup>

From this perspective, one can critique Mosse and—again especially—Li for not taking enough into account the constraints put on development agents by the processes of neo-liberalism. Sometimes it seems as if Li is surprised that trustees repeat the same mistakes over and over again by insisting on the expansion of capitalism while aiming to alleviate its contradictions. Yet, the point is that they also find themselves in market environments whereby their competitive legitimacy for action is an especially scarce good. This point is well understood by Mosse when he posits that certain policy models are sustained to “secure identity, status and the flow of resources” (Mosse 2005: 17). However, Mosse does little to link up his analysis to broader debates about cap-

italist development and neo-liberalism, something that Li explicitly did try to do. As such, his conclusions seem an inverted echo of his own judgment that the “policy machinery fabricates its separation from political economy” (2005: 238). The analysis of development becomes solely a matter of nuance, which might play into the hands of such un-nuanced and undifferentiated political ideologies as neo-liberalism (see also Ferguson 2006).

A similar criticism can be posited toward Sandbrook et al. Their idea of neo-liberalism is still very much in line with what Peck and Tickell (2002) describe as 1980s neo-liberal *deregulation* in favor of the private sector: “neoliberal globalisation is usefully conceived as entailing the reform of both state policies and institutions, ... and as reshaping the rules and practices governing world trade, foreign investment, and financial flows” (Sandbrook et al. 2007: 215). Meanwhile, however, this has given way, according to Peck and Tickell, to more recent state-driven neo-liberal *re-regulation*, whereby not only the policies and institutions, but the whole state system itself is actively neo-liberalized. If this holds for the four case studies—the book seems to (unconsciously) affirm that it does—and Li’s point that “governmental programs are configured by the very forces they would contain” is taken into account, then one might argue that social-democratic regimes do not contain neo-liberalism but that neo-liberalism is “hollowing out” social-democracy by embedding it within the sphere of global markets. Although the authors are not blind to this point, they remain convinced of their original inversion, which this reviewer argues might not only be outdated, but may even make the optimism of the book seem rather hollow. Development becomes caught in neo-liberalism, sanctified, unknowingly, by the social-democratic state.

### Conclusion

Contemporary neo-liberalism increasingly asks for radical opposition, whereas contemporary development increasingly asks for nuance. Both are

desperately needed if nuance is not to be sidelined by development and the latter itself not co-opted by neo-liberalism. Yet, although the tensions that spring from these struggles might never go away, they can be productive. The three books reviewed here are, despite the preceding criticisms, excellent illustrations of this point. Development between nuance and neo-liberalism might thus serve a purpose.

The challenge for anthropology, then, is clear: How to boldly state the case against the many vile effects of neo-liberalism in the development arena, especially in the face of such un-nuanced yet powerful ideas put forth by the aid celebrities I started the review with? Two main suggestions emanate from the above. First, and reinforcing the point forcefully raised by James Ferguson (2006), ethnography should continue to find new ways to link its arguments to the abstract. It is possible to stay true to the ethnographic method and still say something about “Africa,” “neo-liberalism,” and so on. Second and following, anthropology should learn more from other social sciences. Just as political science and geography, among others, have already effectively employed anthropological methods (Olivier de Sardan 2005), there should be no reason why the opposite could not transpire.

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Bram Büscher is currently a PhD candidate with the Department of Social and Cultural Anthropology and a project manager with the Centre for International Cooperation, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, the Netherlands. A political scientist by training, Büscher now studies issues around conservation and development in Southern Africa, focusing specifically on the effects of neo-liberalism on interventions. He recently co-edited a special section of *Conservation and Society* on the politics of the engagement between conservation and the social sciences.  
E-mail: be.buscher@fsw.vu.nl.

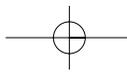
## Notes

1. Narrated in Mosse (2006).

2. Established in 1982 right before the World Parks Congress in Bali as a way for the Indonesian government to show its commitment to international conservation.
3. In her own words (Li 2007: 275), “new programmes routinely retain the limitations of the programmes they replace.”
4. Li thus supports Mosse’s conclusion that “despite our ideals of participation, in development poor people become ‘empowered’ not in themselves, but through relationships with outsiders having better access to resources; and not through the validation of their existing knowledge and actions, but by seeking out and acknowledging the superiority of modern technology and lifestyles, and by aligning themselves with dominant cultural forms” (Mosse 2005: 218).
5. Something that Sandbrook et al. acknowledge but indeed do not detail. See, for instance, their very brief reference to the “darker aspects” of Mauritius’ record—the Afro-creole part of the population that has not “shared equally in the rising prosperity” and the persistent gender inequality (Sandbrook et al. 2007: 130f.).
6. For reasons of space, I am leaving aside here the differences between neo-liberalism and capitalism. For a discussion on conceptualizing neo-liberalism, see for example the article by John Clarke and reaction articles by Neil Smith, Donald Nonini, and Peter Little in the Forum section of this issue of *Focaal*.
7. Examples of these are competition and commercialization.

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