Far-fetched-facts: a parable of development aid

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Introduction

R Rottenburg is a German anthropologist who had spend several years studying development cooperation in Gambia, Ghana, Tanzania, Mozambique and Lesotho. His book is with David Mosse' Cultivating Development,[1] one of the most exciting that has been published these last few years in development anthropology. It is a choral essay and a parable as its subtitle suggests. The author creates multiple subjects of enunciation and gives voices to five development experts gathered around the same puzzle: an european country' —called "Normland" in the book— pressures to restructure public water conveyance companies in 3 african cities according to the 1992 Dublin principles (water has an economic value, its consumption should be paid to face its costs of production, investment, debt service and price policy), in a former socialist country ("Ruritania"[1]) where the socialist tradition was free access to public services although there was not always much garantee in the continuity of the services provided.

The first person to talk is the financier, Johannes Von Moltke, director of the Sub-Saharan division of the Normesian Development Bank who explains the history, framework and goals of the project. He is followed by Julius Shilling, a consultant for the Normesian Development Bank, who describes its practical implementation. Three development anthropologists take the floor afterwards, providing various comments and attempts at analysis. The first one is Samuel Martonosi —also a consultant for Shilling & Partner—, engaged in action but a fierce critic of development processes on the "private" side. He seems to be a mix between James Ferguson —development as an antipolitics machine[2] — and Arturo Escobar —development as hegemony[3]—. The second one is Edward Drotlevski, involved in a research project, doing participant observation and following as a consequence the consultants in their travels to Normland and Ruritania. He is acting as a replacement for the author himself, who writes under his name the fourth part of the book ("Trying again") and also the very fascinating "Prologue", while the others get or share one chapter each: "Belief" (Shilling and von Moltke), "Doubt" (Martonosi), "Searching" (Drotlevski). The reflections of Drotlevski and Rottenburg add up to complete an original anthropologist figure: as aware as David Mosse is of the importance of the sociology of translation for development studies but who would be much more interested than Mosse in the negotiations between donors and beneficiary institutions on objectives and project management and the way to address development professionals, if one wants to make them think and not extend one's own analysis at their expense.

With the choral form, Rottenburg sets himself within the "battefield of knowledge" (N Long), showing in his text how he slowly builds up his own views and emancipates himself from the others' perspectives: the realism of Julius Schilling, the constructivism of Edward Drotlevski, the relativism of Samuel Martonosi. He also takes the

precaution of fictionalizing his account, a process that, he argues, has the advantage of taking the reader away from the question of individual responsibility and directing his attention to "the significance of general principles and contingencies of mundane practices of the development word" (XVIII). In Normland also, "objectivity might be the fidelity to the individual case", unless some formal device is used to guide the reader's interpretation elsewhere[2].

As K Donovan puts it, the sociology of translation allows us to extend to development organizations the abilities to build up support and networks which were once reserved for the analysis of beneficiaries.[4] The contribution of Richard Rottenburg to this thesis takes four different paths, all organized around the examination of the principle of difference and the way it is dealt with by development actors. We are going to present them successively.

For R. Rottenburg, the principle of difference is at the root of all justifications of international aid and its "will to improve" (T.M Li). It is because people, institutions, states, governance, economics in southern countries are different —i.e less advanced— that they deserve to be helped by more affluent ones.[5,6] But in the last decades, there has been a second principle, totally unavoidable and forming a loose couple with the first one, that has emerged. It insists on similarity ("partnership"). Southern countries should also be recognized as sovereign nations, equals to any other that have a right to emancipation, i.e self-determination and ownership. According to the author, in this new context, the difference narrative tends to be underplayed, being deliberately suppressed or living a life confined to theoretical matters or specific practical grounds.

This idea is illustrated first by the author showing, as a direct substantiation of Donovan's proposition that the donor, the Normesian

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[1]As a nod to Ernest Gellner 's —via Anthony Hope— 1987, Nations and Nationalism (Ithaca NY, Cornell University Press), obviously an important source of inspiration for Rottenburg. Ruritania could beconsidered as a stand-in for Tanzania.

[2]D Mosse (2005) doesn't fictionalize his account of the Indo-British Rainfed Farming Project supported by Dfid he studies and attracts, as a consequence, a lot of protests and criticisms from professionals directly associated with it. These criticisms help him extend his analysis of development agents as epistemic communities that thrives on ignorance, that is on a willingness to ignore information that is not personally or institutionally advantageous to discuss openly —see D Mosse. Anti-social anthropology? Objectivity, objection, and the ethnography of public policy and professional communities. *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*. 2006;12:935-956 and also L McGoey. The Logic of Strategic Ignorance. *The British Journal of Sociology*. 2012;63(3):553-576.

Development Bank, acts as a centre of calculation. As development operations gather heterogeneous actors (donors, consultants, operators, beneficiaries, project owners) separated from each other geographically as well as politically, culturally and cognitively, it is very important to be sure that these distances —and the differences that they imply— are never construed as definitive obstacles. The notion of a center of calculation drawn from B Latour,[7,8] serves to give a name to this organization which acts continuously at bridging worlds, collecting "far-fetched facts", putting them in a common context by the imposition of a metacode, i.e a standardized way to report reality from one end of the chain of actors and institutions to the other, using the same taxonomies, criteria for selection and ordering, procedures for measuring and aggregating data and lines of reporting.[3]

When these operations have been successfully carried out, information related to the project is made commensurable, calculable and transportable. It consists mainly of inscriptions on sheets of paper; curves and graphs collected in documents which constitute the common references of all the parties involved and can be easily mobilized to answer calls for accountability. They become "immutable mobiles", objects which can be transported over long distance without deformation.[7] Since Rottenburg is a man of reiteration, endless reformulation and careful reconsiderations, we have another hint as how this center of calculation builds up and gathers momentum in pages 177-179 of his book where he describes the way a given project slowly takes form by being subjected to progressive steps of procedures, inscriptions and documentation which allow for the reciprocal selection of elements of knowledge ("what is true?") and norms ("what is good"?) necessary to its stabilization.[4]

The second line of argument in his book, stresses the changes that the new dominance of the similarity framework has provoked in the division of labour between actors within the development field. Difference continues, obviously, to be the main justification of international aid —it is still very much necessary to secure funding! — But the principle and the reality that it involves are quickly downplayed in the concrete processes of development interventions. The reasons why this new policy has been adopted are diverse and are not only motivated by the will to display fairness and equality of treatment between world's nations. Financiers needed equality to reassure them about the fact that national project beneficiaries will assume liabilities as borrowers. They also needed equality to fit their *scenario* of cumulative progress being made in the development process. In the recent past, they put pressure on northern operating agencies to roll back their activities (increasing their investments, cutting their functioning expenses, i.e expatriate personnel) on the idea that southern institutions will take the relay. They had the feeling that years of development operations under the difference narrative have led to basic infrastructures and national competences being built up, which would justify this new policy and its division of labour. The new agenda offered to each donor agency the opportunity to reinvent itself as a coordinating or facilitating entity, leaving the beneficiary countries, under the guise of partnership or ownership,

the task of setting their priorities, designing programs, implementing them and being accountable for what was being achieved.[5] It was done international development style that is as a lesson with a general value that could easily translate into a blanket strategy to address cooperation in all southern countries, whatever their respective internal progresses. For the less advanced countries —Ruritania obviously belongs to this lot— this was aspirational policy that spelled out a blueprint for an orderly development community and tries to create reality out of words, in a nominalist fashion. In these countries, difference —i.e underdevelopment— is still very much there and they hardly show a real capacity to implement projects with the efficiency that is expected from them. It cannot work otherwise and it is easy to understand why in applying some simple logical reasoning: if the difference narrative is to be taken seriously, we have to admit that it defines everything in the beneficiary country, concerns all sectors, and that, as a consequence, there is no internally developed domain that can be used to gain traction and lift another one out of its misery. In other words, there is no strong infrastructure that already exists and could be used to build another strong infrastructure. R. Rottenburg states this clearly in reference to his case study: "The lion's share of financial assistance in development cooperation flows into the public infrastructure of developing countries. This includes formally organized systems which aim primarily at securing education, health, communications, transportation, and administration. As soon as the support gets underway, organizational structures and appropriate procedures must be set up to enable the transfer of funds, ideas, models, artefacts. This poses a second and more fundamental problem: insofar as the key internal issue requiring external support is the weakness of organizational structures and the unreliability of bureaucratic procedures, the entire process is caught in a vicious circle…Needing an infrastructure in order to be able to establish an infrastructure, is a typical "Catch-22" situation" (XXI-XXII).[6]

Donors, who are aware of this problem without being able to recognize it officially, have to invent unofficial and not entirely satisfying ways to get around this logical constraint. Their practices are described in Rottenburg' thorough exploration of the relationships of the main factors involved in the implementation of a project (the financier, the beneficiary — the national organization, also the borrower and project owner— and the consultants) inspired by the agency theory and its stress on asymetrical information (principal-agent relationships). As M Jensen and W Meckling put it: "we define

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[3]One can add that simple notion of « project » that doesn't distinguish between inputs (the support given) and the results (the domain of reality that takes a « better » existence in the beneficiary country as a consequence of the support) is in itself a fundamental part of this enterprise in differences neutralization.

[4]A nice illustration of the collapse of the fact/value dichotomy (see on this topic, H. Putnam, 2002 *The Collapse of the Fact/Value dichotomy and other essays*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press)

[5]For an explanation of the slowness of the WHO to respond to the Ebola crisis in West Africa linked to this question, see N. Chorev, 2015, *We have never been global: the Who's response to Ebola in Historical Perspective*, Conference to Anso department, Graduate Institute for International and Development Studies, Geneva, march 11, 15 p.

[6]The support of waterworks in the Brong Ahafo region (Ghana) by the French Development Agency (AFD) and studied by M. Tschibambe (2015, *Processus projet, réseau d'acteurs et durabilité des interventions de développement. Le projet d'approvisionnement en eau et assainissement en région Brong Ahafo, Ghana*, Mémoire pour le master en études du développement, IHEID, Genève) and N. Vieux (2015, *Processus projet, réseau d'acteurs et durabilité des interventions de développement. Analyse socio-anthropologique du projet d'hydraulique mixte en région Brong Ahafo (Ghana) financé par l'AFD*, Mémoire pour le master en études du développement, IHEID, Genève) shows an example of this kind of Catch-22 situation with the difficulties of delivering potable water to rural populations through districts that are put officially in charge of the project implementation without been able to deal with the new public procurement rules (tender of bids) and to monitor efficiently the infrastructures and participation work involved in the processes.

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as agency relationship is a contract under which one or more persons (the principal(s)) engage another person (the agent) to perform some service on behalf of which involves delegating some decision making authority to the agent. If both parties to the relationship are utility maximizers, there is good reason to believe that the agent will not always act in the best interests of the principal.[9]

The financier has several problems, specifically in relations with the beneficiary. He wants to be represented as respecting the emancipatory paradigm that puts the national entity in the principal position ("in the driver's seat") but he also wants to retain this position because he wants be sure that his money is used wisely and efficiently by the borrower in a context where there are no immediate mechanisms —in the form of the amortization of the loan for instance— to prove that. And finally, he wants the possibility of escaping responsibility for any possible project's failure and to extend the same immunity (mainly for diplomatic reasons) to the national organization. Following Rottenburg, to resolve these contradictions the actors resort to two different scripts, an official one (O script) that is put forward and paid homage to in all public circumstances and an unofficial one (U script), that is mobilized sometimes as a substitute, sometimes as a complement to the first one, within a principle of loose coupling.[7] Their alternate use of the two scripts allow actors to answer objections or escape practical difficulties coming either from the emancipator or from the difference (and efficiency) frameworks, depending of the context. —O script: financier (lender)=>borrower/ national organization (principal) => consultant (agent); —U script: financier (lender, principal)=> consultant (agent) => borrower/ national organization.

The O script is good for answering problem 1 (respect the emancipatory paradigm) but not for answering problem 2 (the wise use of funds and the efficiency measures necessary to accomplish that). To tackle this problem, the U script is necessary. It allows the financier to secretly stay in charge and try to induce institutional change in the national agency —to transform it into a center of calculation for instance— through very directive instructions that have to be implemented by the consultants.[8] Both scripts are equally good to answer problem 3 (the exoneration of the lender and the national agency responsibilities) by making possible the transformation of consultants into scapegoats in case of difficulties.

The fourth line of analysis in Rottenburg's book is an inquiry into the prohibition of difference, here in the sense of cultural differences, in explanations for project's difficulties or failure. Rottenburg treats this question by presenting the arguments raised by two of his anthropologist avatars, S Martonosi on one hand and E Drotlevski on the other, around the puzzle that constitutes the official objectivist presentation of the project as a technical game. For Martonosi, obviously inspired by Ferguson[2] and Escobar[3] the technical game is the disguise under which a highly political game is being introduced. It functions like a Trojan horse and smuggles in a new social order and a new web of belief. For E Drotlesvski, if the project is presented as a technical game, it is because it is the

only code available for carrying out transcultural negociations, in a context where everyone —especially the national staff in charge of the waterworks and the concerned ministries[9]— is eager to transact. He stresses the shortcomings in Martonosi's positioning. He notes that his antipolitics stance is not relayed by any will to identify the local cultural aspects that would be rendered invisible by the new hegemony blanket and could possibly explain the project's difficulties. "In doing so, Drotlevski comments: he is observing one of the strictest taboos of contemporary anthropology, which absolutely prohibits using people's cultural patterns to interpret their actions" (136-137). The anthropologist is raising here an important issue that seems structurally linked to development anthropology since its inception. The first (pre-translation !) researchers' attempts, mainly focused on beneficiaries' constructivism[4] were already marked by a strong insistence on the actors' strategic skills and agency and a constant avoidance of cultural themes.[10] Rottenburg links this implicit self censorship to anthropologists' extreme awareness of the rules of exclusionary inclusion —inclusion is always conditional and actually aims at exclusion— that characterize late industrial capitalism as analyzed by authors like N Lühmann.[11] As the author explains elsewhere, "Today we presume that anthropological discourse about excluded groups or cultures can itself contribute to their exclusion. It has in other words, become more difficult to speak about difference, because the central topos of the present is exclusion and because the establishment of differences can contribute to mechanisms of exclusion in globalization"[10].

In this kind of context, the difficulties of the project are attributed to the usual suspects (lack of funding, of technical means — computers, cars—, of training, of participation, of communication) but never to a problem of difference, for instance the non-existence, in beneficiary countries, of something already there that would be usable to go further, some infrastructure (what is usually called "an enabling environment") that would be mobilizable to create some other infrastructure, for instance to deliver potable water to consumers. Among these infrastructures, Rottenburg explores specifically the absence of what he calls procedural objectivity, that is some common understanding among all the parties involved in the water management system, and especially at the lowest level (meter readers and maintenance teams), about what data are relevant, how they are to be formatted in order to be recognized as data, and how they are to be linked together to be considered as information. In reality, something called list autophagy by S Martonosi[12] is plaguing the whole system and prevents the national waterworks from acting as a centers of calculation —and to introduce for that purpose, the "mother of all calculations", i.e an accurate computerized database

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[7]This coupling sometimes shows up in the same sentence. See for instance the first principle of the Paris Declaration (2005):"Ownership: Developing countries set their own strategies for poverty reduction, improve their institutions and tackle corruption." http://www.oecd.org/dac

[8]With very little chance of success if the national organization sticks to the O script. Consultant here a is broad name for several different entities that can be used by the financier to try to realize his goals, depending of the project : technical assistance, operating agency, project management unit.

[9]The urban water engineers are the most adamant supporters of the blueprint approach" (p. 142).

[10]My own experience tends to make me think that anthropologists took anti-culturalist stances because a lot of development experts —at least the ones approaching anthropologists— were culturalist. In taking this position, anthropologists were also insisting on the fact that developing people wanted integration within the global system.

[11]But also E. Gellner, M. Castells or S. Sassen.

[12]For Martonosi, *list autophagy* leads to an *objectivity trap* (there is no common ground between the consultants and the project's owner about what are the problems at stake) that leads to an *interface trap* (the consultants' attempts to get the margin of manœuver necessary to adapt the model transferred are constantly resisted by the project's owner that insists that everyone should stick to the technical game and the O script) that leads to an *accountability trap* (the work billed by the consultant's firm is subject to contestation) that leads to *list autophagy* (consultants stop doing their remediation job). See chapter 5.

of water customers—, locating users and listing them, being able to figure out how much they consume and as a consequence, how much they should pay for their consumption, making sure that their bills reach them and are payed and what is the ratio between what has been produced and what is been billed. Going into the systemic problem of the documentation of customers that prevents computerization[13] from being implemented to the satisfaction of all the parties involved, Drotlevski shows the consultants examining the completed forms accumulated at the waterworks headquarters archives and working themselves into a state of progressive perplexity as they uncover the huge gap between what the meter readers are asked to achieve and their actual performances, identifying various levels of "unease" with written procedures that makes it impossible to select only a few problems mentioned in the book:

I. To proceed from a list of water meters to the actual site where a water meter with a particular number is located;

II. To make links between the maps that represent the individual taps within the different technical zones that divide up the city and the information collected on the individual customer forms;

III. To have a house number that would be consensual enough to allow managers to be able address a bill for water consumption to a mailing address without risking confusion and protest.

For Drotlevski, it is these expressions of uneasiness with paper forms and the kind of underlined dispositions that they ask from the meter readers —they are so obvious to us that they don't need further thought and it is only after this exotic detour that they appear as what they are, arbitrary choices related to other arbitrary choices[14]— which require explanation and give us incentives to look at cultural differences. Procedural objectivity obviously makes unreasonable demands on Ruritanian common sense, for example the fact that in this country, there is no great need or opportunity to give priority to written documents over narrative knowledge (the superiority of written procedures has not been demonstrated!) and that objectivity is, above all, the "fidelity to the individual case". As Drotlevski puts it "people are not willing to adjust their sense of reality to a mysterious procedure that subordinates the complex and always specific reality of individual cases to that of categories predetermined in printed form" (p. 141).

Conclusion

Rottenburg's book analyzes waterworks support in an East African country while bringing about a much more ambitious line of reasoning, defining the development enterprise as interplay between the neutralization and the acknowledgement of differences structured by the demands of a world order. According to Lühmann,[11] a major

source of inspiration for Rottenburg along with Latour and Gellner, under this world order there is no generally affirmed principle that would exclude people from having access to aid, unless it is shown that these people don't possess the requirements to benefit from its access (see above, the rules of exclusionary inclusion). No anthropologist in a right state of mind would want to deprive developing people from their legitimate aspiration to have, as Ferguson puts it, « full membership rights in a world society.[12] Hence, one finds (unsurprisingly !) in their discourses an adamant insistence on the agency of the beneficiaries and a strong emphasis on political anthropology and its counterpart: a constant euphemization of "cultural", (rechristened "culturalist"!) explanations.

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Conflict of interest

Author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

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[13]And also past attempts at building up a master database by entering information from an outdated survey.

[14]To fill out a form one needs to decentrate himself, i.e to have an understanding of the knowledge that is sought after by the people that have produced the form and to care about this goal.