Colonization, Development, Humanitarian Aid: Towards a Political Anthropology of International Aid

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# ABSTRACT

The goals of this paper are threefold: 1) to trace the history of anthropological research on aid since colonial times; 2) to question what we see as today’s blurring of lines between humanitarian and development aid; and 3) to call for a critical political anthropology of international aid. In doing so, we update the genealogy of French-language anthropological literature on colonization, development and humanitarian aid since 1949, providing the context necessary for our discussion of the recent shift that has taken place between development and humanitarian aid. This in turn supports the need for an anthropology of international aid that is both anchored in the history of the discipline and able to come to grips with the ways in which aid is currently being reconfigured in a period of neoliberal globalization.

Keywords: anthropology, colonialism, development, humanitarianism, international aid

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## A Research Area Wavering Between Attraction and Rejection

The anthropology of development and of humanitarian aid emerged, in effect, from a long genealogy. Many key milestones, particularly in France, can be identified in the 1950s, in the period in which the concept of the “third world” was invented (by Alfred Sauvy and/or Georges Balandier), and in which attention was simultaneously drawn to emancipation movements among colonized peoples from “underdeveloped countries.” This formula in itself conferred a slight stigma, but was soon replaced by the more positive “countries in a state of development” or “developing countries.” More precisely, this was part of a wider era of national reconstruction in the North (the postwar and the advent of the thirty-year postwar boom, outlined in the Marshall Plan), and the construction of national identities along varied lines in the South where diverse macroeconomic models were mobilized to initiate the process of development, such as the...
“poles of growth” promoted by François Perroux or the planning model, dear to Wassily Leontief that promoted cross-sectorial exchanges (between agriculture and industry, for example).

Whichever economic science held the inevitable lead position, other social sciences and schools of thought joined in the debate about questions of development and underdevelopment in respect of world regions that had been colonized or which were just at the point of emerging from colonization, in particular sub-Saharan Africa. In reality, because these parts of the world had served mainly as colonies to be exploited, most of the proposed macroeconomic models, which emerged largely from the experience of Western capitalism, were de facto difficult to apply. This is because the famous concept of the “colonial situation” as defined by Georges Balandier at the beginning of the 1950s (Balandier 1950), was predicated heuristically on the general character of outlying regions where the whole economic plan was conceived to prioritize the interests of the European metropolitan cities, and took few pains to instill any endogenous development (Bairoch 1967). However insofar as he had grasped that in the multiple dimensions of this “situation,” the systems of colonial repression had given rise to different forms of resistance, Balandier paid equal attention to all that was likely to impact on the original given, namely the dominant power relations. From this perspective, the social changes generated by specific colonized peoples seemed to him to be particularly promising promoters of global changes, which could affect the very nature of those given political relationships. But Georges Balandier could see other things in an even clearer light and initiated a dynamic sociology whereby the Africa he was observing, that is, the Africa of the French Union, was an Africa undergoing important economic and sociopolitical changes. It was not only that the system of colonial rule that had dominated the colonial period until 1945 had been abolished, extending the rights of African subjects to a small degree, but that metropolitan France, by means of its state power, invested in its African territories like never before (Dozon 2003). Mostly notably, because of FIDES (Investment Funds for Economic and Social Development, created in 1946, a year after the CFA franc), vast operations of logistics and equipment, great hydroelectrical projects (like the particularly expensive project started in the colonial period and overseen by the Office of the Niger for cotton growing), rather undermined the notion of “developing countries.” Thus, in the 1950s, far from wanting to break with its overseas territories (as with the ending of colonial wars in Indochina and Algeria), France continued its international exchanges with them at the same time as it kept them in a long-term situation of dependency.

It is in the light of these rapid and at times spectacular evolutions (which despite everything gave rise to the independence of the French territories of Black Africa) that development became a worthy object of study for an Africanism (see especially Balandier 1954 and 1967) that did not turn its back on history or on societies in the making. It would deal with political issues as long as development was a question of emancipation and of the construction of national communities. It is worth clarifying that Balandier was far from alone in France in adopting both a reality principle and a “principle of hope,” to reprise Ernst Bloch’s key phrase, through which social sciences could become involved in the development of “new countries” and outline a wide horizon of possibilities.

In fact, the group most involved in this was Économie et Humanisme [Economics and Humanism] (which was both the name of a center of action-research and of a journal), a group that had emerged out of Catholic socialism and had been created during the Occupation, and grew after World War Two around its main founder, Père Lebret. It followed the strict line of the economist of development mentioned above, François Perroux (Puel 2004). It was critical of liberal economics and partisan to state-initiated development, but close to populations and communities. It had a strong following in Latin America and Africa, and especially in Senegal where, at the dawn of national independence, Lebret worked on the first four-year plan of what was termed “African socialism.” In centering its planning doctrine on involvement and cooperation, this group’s influence generated a sort of applied social science, or a practical sociology, viewed through rainbow-tinted glasses, in the manner of nineteenth-century utopians. It has inspired initiators of development projects right up to the current day and furnished an example of “developmental populism” like the varied forms that Jean-Pierre Olivier de Sardan (1990) was able to detect among World Bank experts in the 1970s and 1980s. In giving a higher priority to rural areas, their conceptual frameworks were in fact influenced profoundly by the large footprint of their agricultural operations or the management of postindependence African campaigns supporting rural cooperatives and the participation
of village communities. These experiences were part of the body of plans and large operations that the majority of African states put into action during the first two postcolonial decades, and they extended and flourished when large-scale plans and operations were abandoned as a result of neoliberal denunciation of bad state government, leading them to be replaced by programs for decentralization and a policy of small projects focused on local development.

Certainly, there are several differences between the perspective of Georges Balandier, which was focused on development but which stood aloof from concrete applications, and that of the leading lights of Economics and Humanism who believed firmly in and acted on the impulse to construct a science (a science of development, in this instance, that mobilized a large range of disciplines), that was linked in reality to an idealized vision of traditional African society, which in itself was strongly inspired and underpinned by postwar social Catholicism. In spite of their divergences and their different perspectives, they shared, nevertheless, the idea that the true development of young nations supposed an endogenic dynamism capable of markedly transforming colonial economics and their persistent relationships of subordination in respect of the metropolises. This is why for them, following the example of the African elites, and more generally the third-world elites in the 1950s that brought in emancipatory movements, Marxism was a major reference point, even though its antagonistic vision of social life was far from being shared widely. In this respect, Henri Desroche is a particularly emblematic figure: though a priest and theologian and a member of Economics and Humanism in its early days, and later a sociologist, he was dismissed for showing too great an interest in the field of Marxism. However, he remained loyal to the spirit of the movement, most particularly through favoring utopias of socialization and especially in the systematic promotion of cooperatives, above all in Latin American and Africa. In addition, Desroche was singularly enterprising as an individual, creating cooperative colleges and universities and never leaving off reconciling a sociology of development (which was above all an applied sociology), with the production of one of the important texts of religious sociology.

From this perspective, and which would merit a thorough study of intellectual history, it is quite remarkable that those in France, who campaigned to make problems of development in the third world central to social sciences, were also analysts of religious phenomena that never ceased to infuse the histories of people colonized by Western nations. This, however, should doubtless come as no surprise, as it is well known that several of them emerged from the priestlyhood or theology. But that also chimes with Georges Balandier's view that Congolese messianism was an exemplar of “initiative taking” among Africans under colonial rule. A similar approach can be noted in an imposing figure from this era – Roger Bastide, the author of an important work dedicated to Afro-Brazilian cults, the “religions of preservation” which reinvented themselves in the context of the transatlantic slave colonies, and who wrote the first work of applied anthropology (Bastide 1971) dedicated largely to problems of development. Thus, in France in the 1950s and 1960s a significant trend in research paid close attention to the experiences of colonized peoples, to their qualities of resilience, emancipation, and innovation (which we would now call their agency), which simultaneously promoted a sociology of development and a sociology of religion, which, where they intersected, promoted a practical sociology whose followers were inclined to develop a solidarity with such peoples. In this way they renewed the ethics as well as the content of their discipline. This intellectual history should also be enlarged to include two Italian anthropologists – Ernesto de Martino with his wide-ranging study of the place of magic in southern Italy, and Vittorio Lanternari with his imposing synthesis on the theme of the religious movements of oppressed peoples (Ethnologie française 1994). However, this approach, exemplified by the Economics and Humanism group, in which a certain social-science expertise seemed able to coexist with a belief in the harmonious development of third-world countries, was quickly replaced by a radical questioning of the actual schemes carried out. More precisely, Marxist analysts, rejecting any form of humanist goodwill, were particularly inspired by the groundbreaking writings of Rosa Luxemburg, which explained that the way in which development was actually being carried out in the majority of these countries was nothing other than an exercise in the refashioning and amplification of former forms of colonization (or pillage as it was more generally described). The “development of underdevelopment” (Frank 1969), or the stress on accumulation that had begun in the sixteenth century and benefited the great capitalist centers through...
It did not hesitate, and European colonialism (Leclerc 1972). Above all extent that, like in the United States, all fieldwork with Latin American populations was brought into the milieu in which researchers and experts working on Africa were working was composed of a wide circulation of data, field methodologies, and ideas. It followed the example of approaching the ambit of African farmers via “territories,” as initiated by Paul Pelissier and Gilles Sautter (1964). A number of studies dedicated to a certain type of agricultural production often furnished the arguments of Marxist anthropology, while the concepts they created could be used to understand the resistances of the rural populations that opposed it, particularly in the context of development.

This type of anthropology was also largely fuelled by Africanist research (itself influenced strongly by the revival of Marxist theory as instilled by Louis Althusser, and most particularly by its capacity to construct and combine modes of production). It did not hesitate to cross swords with other currents in the discipline that, along with those social-science studies, wanted more or less to support “development” when they should have been working to denounce it. In the eyes of the Marxists, development, with its frequent use of humanistic rhetoric, was nothing more than a ruse to cover the redeployment of imperialist strategies in the wake of so-called Western “civilizing missions” and their “emphasis on colonial values.”

Nevertheless, no matter how well it was known abroad under the impressive name of the “Paris School,” Marxist anthropology did not come to occupy the whole field of African Studies. During the 1970s, while they enjoyed strong institutional and political support (which corresponded quite well to the place that France gave to its “African backyard” (Dozon 2003), researchers in the CNRS [National Center for Scientific Research] and ORSTOM [Overseas Office of Scientific and Technical Research] and IEDES [Research Institute on Economic and Social Development], various consultants, sociologists, economists (one might say socioeconomists or agro-economists), and, above all, geographers produced a body of work that was more or less concerned with the world of development. Some researchers, who were particularly involved in this, were carrying on the work of Economics and Humanism, with regard to the creation of farming cooperatives. Despite the apparently antagonistic positions that they occupied, the milieu in which researchers and experts working on Africa were working was composed of a wide circulation of data, field methodologies, and ideas. It followed the example of approaching the ambit of African farmers via “territories,” as initiated by Paul Pelissier and Gilles Sautter (1964). A number of studies dedicated to a certain type of agricultural production often furnished the arguments of Marxist anthropology, while the concepts they created could be used to understand the resistances of the rural populations that opposed it, particularly in the context of development.
Given the core of African studies in that period that focused on rural societies (the ethnic monograph based on village monographs and field surveys being the standard model in the 1970s), they could not avoid the world of development even though they wished to critique harshly the manner in which it allegedly served to exploit African rural dwellers (Amin 1975). This is why when, a little later, Marxist leadership began to weaken at the beginning of the 1980s, a number of researchers had little difficulty adopting a realist perspective. In the same way that we have been able to talk about the “colonial situation context” that Georges Balandier could analyze and objectify so well in his time, it was clear that there was now a “global context of development,” which, while it varied between countries and regions, was still generating social change. This context required going beyond received anathemas in order to be more precisely delineated and examined. Jean-Pierre Olivier de Sardan (1975) strongly urged a departure from the determinism of the relationship of center to margins to focus better on the dynamic of social relations between the interior itself and its marginal formations, that is to say, on exactly how rural development projects could lead to a decoding of relationships between the states and their rural communities. This “recentering” on local configurations was an invitation to study such projects from a closer position, to admit that they were often far from attaining their objectives, and that there was a gap between the intentions of donors and their agents (often associated with various institutions of bilateral or international aid and national-state structures) and the way in which the people who were the targets of aid received it. Far from submitting to the rules and infrastructures of the “developers” – whether of socialist or economic liberal orientation – it was demonstrated that the “developers” frequently offered resistance, not necessarily in the form of socio-cultural obstacles as was often and incorrectly stated, but through socio-economic strategies manifest in the capacity to divert or appropriate the interventions directed at them. This was the starting point of an anthropology of development that simultaneously reconnected with the approach exemplified by Balandier in the 1950s.

Following the author of *Sociologie actuelle de l’Afrique noire*, who had first set out to compare colonial society and the society of the colonized, and who then came to understand that “development” formed the horizon of countries in a state of decolonization, young researchers, mostly under the direction of ORSTOM, consultancy groups, or economic cooperation services, began to develop a critical distance that at the same time targeted the pairing or opposition of developers/developed. They took a middle line between applied social science and the approach of Economics and Humanism and its denunciation by Marxists (Augé 1972). It became a question of making a close study of the situation as created at a local level through the actual implementation of development projects relative to their capacity to subjugate rural communities, taking into account the ways in which the latter had appropriated or circumvented them, as well as examining the world of the developers themselves (Dozon 1979). There were those who assumed a certain technological or scientific superiority or who acted in the name of agronomic or economic rationality, but who, in fact, revealed significant prejudice towards the human cultures they sought to “develop” and a misunderstanding of the local realities they were trying hard to transform. The anthropological gaze now turned toward these ones and restored, to some extent, a greater balance or symmetry between the agents of development and aid recipients (Latour 1982).

It was on this base, which extended and renewed the work of Georges Balandier, that a new “socio-anthropology of development” (with “socio” making reference, as with Balandier, to social dynamisms and transformations), was founded on the decline of various forms of Marxism and third worldism, prevalent in France in the 1980s to the 1990s. This was especially strong in ORSTOM, with researchers such as Jean-François Bâ, Jean-Pierre Chauveau, or Jean-Pierre Dozon, as well as those clustered around APAD [Euro-African Association for the Anthropology of Social Change and Development] and its foremost figure, Jean-Pierre Olivier de Sardan. In the 1990s it extended its field of investigation beyond the sectors of rural dwellers and agricultural projects to include, most notably, health, towns, urban management, and public services. The socioanthropology of development thus began to signify objects studied in the world of development, as well as the set of themes and conceptual schemas, like the one which consisted of studying development context in terms of arenas or the strategies of agents. At the same time as it developed its capacity to critically analyze development projects, this type of socioanthropology sought to produce works that improved such projects or made

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them more amenable to appropriation by their target communities. In other words, though much richer in terms of experiences, conceptual tools, or fieldwork methodologies than the practical sociology of Lebret or Henri Desroche, or even the applied anthropology of Roger Bastide, this socioanthropology of development still, like them, focused firmly on the key place of an impulse within social sciences to not only produce knowledge but also apply it: to make sure their scientific rigor could prove itself in the political confrontations of social change.

■ A Renewed Dynamic

Since the second half of the 1990s, French research on the anthropology of development has come to be influenced by a wave of “postmodern” critical analysis. This research current, particularly strong on the other side of the Atlantic, was born out of a sense of opposition, articulated on two levels. First, it opposes studies produced within the field of development anthropology, and reprises in part arguments used against the involvement of anthropologists in colonial administration projects in previous decades, and more broadly, the arguments of those who oppose any form of applied anthropology, which it exposes in the most virulent fashion. Second, anthropologists such as Arturo Escobar (1995) aim to deconstruct the epistemological foundations of the discourses of aid.

Above all, a new interest in studies of humanitarian aid has appeared since the year 2000 on the part of French anthropologists. These studies fall into three main streams with different intellectual historiographies.

The first stream groups together anthropological research on refugees and humanitarian aid, which should be understood in this context as emergency relief. Two main strands, or themes, can be identified within French anthropological research. The first centers on refugees’ strategies of survival and adaptation, and includes the humanitarian aid offered to them. Marion Fresia, for example, has traced the processes of social change induced in Mauritanian refugees (Fresia 2009) from Senegal, as a result of forced displacement resulting in refugee status. To give another example, Laëtitia Atlani-Duault and Cécile Rousseau (2000) have shown how Vietnamese boat people, collectively and in stages, make sense of organized sexual violence sustained during their flight from the country, and how this reconstruction is in contradiction to forms of psychiatric humanitarian aid offered by UN agencies.

In this first group, a second strand concentrates on the analysis and critique of the “system” of humanitarian aid among refugees and asylum seekers. The work of Michel Agier, for example, analyzes what he calls “humanitarian government,” whose aim, according to Agier, is to “highlight(s) the control that this exerts on extraterritorial areas [what he calls “out-places”] and on the world’s peoples (the outcasts), pariahs of all types, as vulnerable as they are undesirable” (2008:15; 2002; 2003; 2008; 2011).

A second stream of francophone studies on humanitarian aid comes out of a French political anthropology of public health (Dozon and Fassin 2001; Hours 1986), and critical American medical anthropology. It brings together francophone researchers interested in the study of humanitarian issues from the point of view of analyses of “biopower” and the government of the body (for example Farmer 1992, 1996 and his analysis of the “pathologies of power”, 2004; Pandolfi 2000 and 2009 and Didier Fassin (Fassin and Vazquez 2005; Fassin 2007; Fassin and Pandolfi 2010). The latter in particular, builds on the concept of “biolegitimacy” in order to analyze the current “deployment of moral sentiments in contemporary politics” or of “the humanitarian as the language of practices of governance of human beings” (Fassin 2010, 17).

The third stream groups together anthropologists who come from the French socio-anthropology of development and the English-speaking critical anthropology of development, and who have extended their research interests to include humanitarian aid. There are two reasons for this.

The first reason, in our analysis, is that in recent years there has been a shift in aid agents’ understanding of the nature of humanitarian aid, which is mirrored by anthropologists. This continues a primary shift that began at the end of the 1980s, when the sole focus was development aid. As Jean-Pierre Dozon notes (2007), APAD researchers had acknowledged the new reality of development aid in that era. They no longer defined development in relation to the grand projects or theoretical models that had characterized the years 1960-1970, but considered simply that there is “development work” wherever there is a “developmentalist configuration” (Olivier de Sardan 1995), or in other words, wherever there are “eminently empirical domains where multiple institutions
and agents of development interact and are confronted by the groups or local populations that are the targets of their schemes or projects” (Dozon 2007, 223). From that point on, in French anthropological studies, development became defined according to the way in which the aid actors studied characterized it, as well as the social world in which it evolved. Jean-Pierre Chauveau presents this very concisely in 1985, when he says, “There is ‘development’ quite simply where there are developers and where one of the groups claiming to implement development organizes a specific intervention within other social groups” (Chauveau 1985, 164).

Twenty-five years later, a second shift can be identified. This time it relates to humanitarian aid, associated primarily with emergency relief. It also extends progressively, in literature and anthropology, to all the actors studied characterize as aid, but now minus an analysis of the political logic adopted in the previous shift. We could reprise here, almost word for word, Jean-Pierre Chauveau’s statement from twenty-five years ago on the subject of development studies, and note, this time with regard to anthropological research on humanitarian aid, that there is now humanitarian aid simply where groups claiming to implement humanitarian aid intervene and organize an intervention mechanism to carry out this aid within other social groups.

The second reason is that, rather than simple changes in the taxonomy of international aid, the issue at stake is the actual blurring of lines between development and humanitarian aid. Since the end of the Cold War, there has been an “extension of the domain of humanitarism” within development, as shown by Atlani-Duault (2005, 2007). This phenomenon takes multiple forms, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa where a growing number of NGOs have taken the place of development projects, be it in the areas of the fight against poverty, health, reconstruction, governance policies or human rights (Atlani-Duault 2009; Copans 2009 and 2010; Dozon 2007; Vidal 2009).16.

■ Towards a political anthropology of international aid

In this new context, we call for critical anthropological research into the way that humanitarian aid seems, in many domains, to be substituting itself bit by bit for what was once called development (and which anthropology had taken on as an object of research). We also call for research on the general context in which this aid is being deployed, which involves international institutions, NGOs and local actors, but which at the same time obliges the discipline to become more directly political in order to grasp, beyond official rhetorics, the nature of relationships between these various groups.

It is in no way neutral that the current humanitarian argumentation is expressed overwhelmingly in the keys of indignation and compassion. As well as new forms of activism and protest, it includes countless local micro-projects that are often limited in time and space, and which tend to translate situations of injustice and political and economic inequality into appeals for compassion and case-by-case reparation. Faced with this fragmentation of activities and its tacit acceptance of humanitarian argumentation, it is no longer possible to appeal to political theories that underpinned development projects until the 1980s. But there is an urgent need to bring critical political analysis to bear on this blurring.

Just as it was necessary, in view of the evolution of development aid twenty-five years ago, to create an anthropology of development (one that updated the asymmetrical relationships between developers and developees) it is necessary today to create a political anthropology of international aid that reflects current realities and simultaneously embraces the facts of development and humanitarian aid. This anthropology must take into account what the international aid “industry” offers to the populations of the South “for their own good,” demonstrate what makes it tick, and decode the strategies of diversion or appropriation that the target populations throw up in resistance. In the same way that the analysis of the colonial situation by Georges Balandier and others supported a political anthropology of African societies after the Second World War, and that the 1980s’ socio-anthropology of development studied development projects in a context in which states still had a predominant role, a political anthropology of international aid must take into account the current context of neo-liberal globalization – and subject it to rigorous and critical political analysis. ■
I Notes


2. In this respect, we cannot stress enough the strongly Fourierist accent of the Institute that Père Lebret founded in 1957, namely IRFED (l’Institut international de recherches et de formation en vue du développement harmonisé).

3. The range of texts by Guy Belloncle, a leading member in the movement after the fading out of Lebret, are particularly edifying in regard to this viewpoint. See in particular *Anthropologie appliquée et développement associatif. Tvente années d’expérimentation sociale en Afrique sahélienne* (1960-1990) (Paris: L’Harmattan, 1993).

4. His work *Signification du marxisme* (Paris: Éditions ouvrières, 1949) was condemned by the Catholic authorities of that period.

5. This flourished along with the sixth section of the École pratique des hautes études (the future EHESS [l’École des hautes études en sciences sociales]) in 1958, where he created the chair of Sociologie de la coopération et du développement.

6. He was also the founder of the “Groupe de sociologie des religions” (1954) and the journal *Archives de sciences sociales des religions* (1956). In this context it is worth noting that a special issue of this journal to celebrate fifty years was dedicated to Henri Desroche (*Archives de sciences sociales des religions, Les Archives… cinquante ans après* 136 (2006)).

7. See also his earlier article, which is very resonant of Desroche’s work, “Messianisme et développement économique et social,” *Cahiers internationaux de sociologie* 31 (1961): 3-14.

8. In the case of Roger Bastide, it is certainly necessary to include questions of mental-health issues in the consideration of development, as he has dedicated several books to this issue, as well as (taking inspiration from North American cultural anthropology) symptoms and modes of expression of cultural clashes.


11. The journal *Tiers Monde*, founded in 1960 by IDEES (Research Institute on Economic and Social Development, itself founded in 1957), the same year that several African countries gained independence, is particularly illustrative of this point of view. This is because, from its first issue, its chief editor, Henri Laufer, declared the journal open to all ideas and innovations, whether theoretical or practical.

12. The most resounding criticism was undoubtedly represented by the publication in 1974 by the Sahel Information Committee (led by a group of Africans), *Qui se nourrit de la famine en Afrique? Le dossier politique de la famine au Sahel* (Paris: Maspero).

13. Even as theorists of imperialism were denouncing development, it was being realized in concrete terms, quite often through socializing experiences and corresponding practical models, sometimes specifically designed by the “experts” of Economics and Humanism. See Uma J. Lele, 1975.


15. This partial offset a rejection or affirmation of development, in the name of an ecological politics of decay, on a form of antidevelopment. See in particular Partant (1997) and Latouche (2000).

16. See also Olivier de Sardan in this issue.

I Bibliography


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