

From Quest for Civilization to War against Poverty Observations regarding development discourse

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Introduction

This paper is about development rhetoric. Development rhetoric as a particular aspect of development discourse, focusing on the flow of magnificent, noble, nice-sounding words: Democracy and human rights, good governance, gender equality, participation, empowerment, partnership. The verbal creativity and the eloquence of development agencies are indeed remarkable. Implementation may have suffered setbacks. But the production of nice-sounding words at headquarters never seems to stop. What is this all about? Which purposes are served by these verbal flows? What are the implicit assumptions brought across along with the noble words? Which picture of power relations emerges? And how has it changed - or not changed - over the years?

The first section of the paper: *Gangs of virtue - then and now* discusses two documents, one written in 1898 and the other in 1994, posing the question of continuity and change. Concluding this discussion five characteristics of contemporary development discourse are pointed out.

The second section: *Development rhetoric - symbol and ritual?* looks closer at development rhetoric in an institutional context, suggesting that it might be serving purposes of its own.

In the third and final section: *Thinking beyond development discourse* suggestions are offered for other ways of thinking and talking about issues of 'development'.

Gangs of virtue - then and now

Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* seems to be an inexhaustible story with endless possibilities of (re)interpretation.¹

I am going to use it too, for its wonderful, but also troubled and ironic, description of development eloquence (colonial style) as an independent and almost self-sustaining flow of noble and lofty expression - in the context of the story originating first and foremost from the Company agent and chief of the Inner Station, the very gifted, promising up-and-coming Mr. Kurtz. For newcomers to this Conrad-tale, here is some of the context:

The story takes place in Africa one hundred years ago, and describes an upstream river journey from the Central to the Inner Station. Apart from Marlow, the steamboat captain who tells the story to his friends one evening seated on the deck of a ship at anchor at the mouth of the river Thames, waiting for the turn of the tide - the leading figure in the tale is the said Mr. Kurtz. Although the Company, for which Kurtz works, is Belgian, he himself has been educated partly in England; his mother is half-English, his father half-French, "all Europe contributed to the making of Kurtz" (Conrad, 1902/1983: 86. References in the following are to this edition).

The Company is the Société Anonyme Belge pour le Commerce du Haut-Congo, the Inner Station is Stanley Falls at the upper part of the river Congo, right in the middle of Africa. The year is 1898, the year Conrad started writing *Heart of Darkness*, based on his own experience as an employee of the Company in 1890.

It is the heyday of early imperialism. The Berlin Conference 1885 had divided Africa between European powers. Most of the

¹ Cf. this remark by Homi Bhabha: "It is radical perversity, not sage political wisdom, that drives the intriguing will to knowledge of postcolonial discourse. Why else do you think the long shadow of Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* falls on so many texts of the postcolonial pedagogy?" (Bhabha 1994: 212).

white patches on the map - white because they were unknown, undescribed - had ceased to be " blank spaces of delightful mystery" (33); the white patches had become places of darkness. Stanley's two books on Africa: *Through the Dark Continent*, and *In Darkest Africa* (dark, darker, darkest!) had been published in 1878 and 1890 respectively, and were widely read. Stanley had led the first expedition of the Belgians in the Congo, in order to establish trading stations and administration centres and "to prove that the Congo natives were susceptible of civilization and that the Congo basin was rich enough to repay exploitation" (Paul O'Prey, 1983:12). In 1889, when Conrad was arranging for his departure for Congo, Stanley's return from his latest expedition 'rescuing' Emin Pasha in Sudan, was receiving much publicity and acclaim. Stanley was the centre of celebration and banquets in major cities of Europe. When he was met in Brussels by King Leopold II the banquet hall was decorated with pyramids of flowers adorned with the tusks of 400 elephants (Lindqvist, 1993: 53). Echoes of Stanley are present in Conrad/Marlow's descriptions of Kurtz, in his desire to "have kings meet him at railway-stations on his return from some ghastly Nowhere, where he intended to accomplish great things" (110).

Few years later, in 1897, the European event was the jubilee of Queen Victoria, celebrating her 60 years on the British throne, a period in which the British Empire had expanded unbelievably. Everybody hailed imperialism, the critical voices were few and far between. Imperialism was considered a civilizing enterprise, a worthy cause; difficult, yes, replete with setbacks, but worthy. More like 'development' today than we might like to think. *Take up the White Man's burden / The savage wars of peace - / Fill full the mouths of famine / and bid the sickness cease; And when your goal is nearest / The end for others sought / Watch sloth and heathen folly / Bring all your hope to naught.* Kipling's well known poem, of which this is the second verse, was written in 1901. Compared to contemporary reports of corruption in African state bureaucracies the tone of voice has not changed that much.

In Conrad's tale two editions of imperialism are at work. One is represented by the Company Manager at the Central Station (Leopoldville/Kinshasa) and his uncle, head of 'the Eldorado Exploring Expedition', including the other Company agents at the Central station. "Their talk (...) was the talk of sordid

buccaneers: it was reckless without hardihood, greedy without audacity, and cruel without courage. There was not an atom of foresight or of serious intention in the whole batch of them, and they did not seem aware that these things are wanted for the work of the world. To tear treasure out of the bowels of the land was their desire, with no more moral purpose at the back of it than there is in burglars breaking into a safe" (61).

The other edition of imperialism is represented by Kurtz. Kurtz belongs to "the new gang - the gang of virtue" (55). Kipling, had he been around, would have belonged to that gang too. Kurtz is working for *an idea*. "Each station should be like a beacon on the road towards better things, a centre for trade, of course, but also for humanizing, improving, instructing" (65). Most of what Marlow gets to know about Kurtz is told by people Marlow meet on his way to the Inner Station. According to these Kurtz is a remarkable person. He paints, writes poetry, is a great musician. He has high ideals and a gift of noble expression. Kurtz' masterpiece is a manus of 17 pages, a report made for the International Society for the Suppression of Savage Customs, "for its future guidance" (86). Marlow has read it and tells about it: "It was eloquent, vibrating with eloquence (...) it was a beautiful piece of writing. (...) The peroration was magnificent, though difficult to remember, you know. It gave me the notion of an exotic immensity ruled by an august Benevolence. It made me tingle with enthusiasm. This was the unbounded power of eloquence - of words - of burning, noble words" (86-87).

When at last the steamer carrying Marlow, the Manager and a bunch of agents, does reach the Inner Station, and Marlow finally meets Kurtz in person, Kurtz is very ill, but his voice has volume. "Though he could hardly stand, there was still plenty of vigour in his voice" (106). Previously, before meeting Kurtz, Marlow realizes that he looks forward to *listening* to Kurtz, more than to seeing him or to shaking his hand. His impression of him was of "his being a gifted creature, and that of all his gifts the one that stood out pre-eminently, that carried with it a sense of real presence, was his ability to talk, his words - the gift of expression (...) his inextinguishable gift of noble and lofty expression" (83, 110). This gift is pre-eminent to the very last: "A voice, a voice! It was grave, profound, vibrating, while the man did not seem capable of a whisper" (100). "It rang deep to the very last. It survived his strength to hide in the magnificent folds of eloquence the barren darkness of his heart" (110).

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The point of the tale - and Marlow's problem - is that all this eloquence has a back side. Kurtz is talking wonderfully, his speech is full of high ideals and of burning, noble words. His doings however, are of a different calibre. When approaching the Inner Station Marlow discovers, looking through his fieldglasses, that the round balls on the top of a number of slim posts in front of Kurtz' house are not carved ornaments as he first thought, but human heads on stakes. And talking with a young Russian adventurer whom he meets in the jungle, he hears about Kurtz' indulgence in "unspeakable rites" (86) and domination of the natives. "The camps of these people surrounded the place, and the chiefs came every day to see him. They would crawl ..." To Marlow listening to this is even worse than seeing the heads on the stakes. "After all that was only a savage sight, while I seemed at once bound to have been transported into some lightless region of subtle horrors where pure, uncomplicated savagery was a positive relief" (97-98). Interestingly, according to Lindqvist, the heads on the stakes, as well as the crawling chiefs have models in contemporary newspaper stories about life in the colonies. The heads on stakes in front of the house of a certain captain Rom at Stanley Falls station are mentioned in an article in the *Saturday Review*, Conrad's favourite paper, on December 17, 1898. Conrad starts work on *Heart of Darkness* on the following day (Lindqvist, 1993: 40). The image of the crawling chiefs takes inspiration from the behaviour of the British in West Africa 1896. Approaching Kumasi, the capital of the Ashante, the British officers - among them the later boy-scout hero Baden-Powell - receive a delegation from the Ashante King offering capitulation. The British respond by arresting the King and his entire family, whereafter the King and his mother are forced crawling to approach the British officers, seated on biscuit-tins (Lindqvist, 1993: 67).

It is characteristic of Marlow's (and Conrad's) description of Kurtz that his written - or spoken - eloquence never touches what in fact goes on. The "unspeakable rites" remain unspeakable. With two exceptions. One is a handwritten postscript to the 17 pages report, "a kind of note at the foot of the last page, scrawled evidently much later, in an unsteady hand (...) It was very simple, and at the end of that moving appeal to every altruistic sentiment it blazed at you, luminous and terrifying, light a flash of lightning in a serene sky: *Exterminate all the brutes*" (87). The other exception is when Kurtz is dying, his last

words. "He cried out in a whisper at some image, at some wisdom - he cried out twice, a cry that was no more than a breath - *The horror! The horror!*" (111).

In Lindqvist's view "Exterminate all the brutes" is the basic wisdom of European thought. Behind shifting styles and modes of eloquence, this is what it is all about. Genocide is part of the history of European expansion from its earliest beginning - till today. In spite of all eloquence the rich get richer and the poor get poorer. Many die. We all know. "What we lack is not knowledge, but the courage to acknowledge what we know and to draw conclusions from it" (Lindqvist, 1993: 11,194). Maybe "the horror" is an expression of exactly this insight?

What I want to lift out of Conrad's story here is especially the two editions of imperialism. The simpleminded, straightforward, cruel exploitation of 'the Eldorado Exploring Expedition' et al. has in the meanwhile retired to back stage. So has the direct expression of global power relations in the world 'imperialism'. Occupying centre stage today are the descendants of *the gang of virtue*. In tune with the Kurtz-style noble mode of expression, imperialism has been renamed 'development'. Imperialism suggests power relations; development suggests growth, evolution, gradual change for the better, things we all want. Development rhetoric nowadays can trace its ancestry back to Kurtz and Kipling.

Danish development aid: Commitment to combat poverty

After the transformation of previous colonies into postcolonial states, terminologies shifted too. Talks of 'imperialism', 'white men's burdens' and 'civilizing missions' were abandoned and replaced with new phrases, among which the 'commitment to combat poverty' and the 'promotion of economic growth' figure centrally. The words may have changed, but noble and lofty expression is still in high demand.

As a modest example of the style of contemporary development rhetoric, I have taken the current strategy paper of the Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs / Danida regarding development policy: "A Developing World. Strategy for Danish Development

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Policy towards the Year 2000". The text, from which I quote, is an English summary of the full Strategy Paper, presented to the Danish Government March 1994.² This document is full of good intentions and noble words; a leading topic is the *poverty orientation* "which constitutes a fundamental principle of Danish development assistance" (Danida, 1994: 7). It is stated that "Danish development co-operation is rooted in the commitment to combat poverty affecting large groups of the population in many developing countries" (Danida, 1994: 6). This because, as seen by Danida, "poverty lies behind some of the most fundamental problems facing all developing countries in the years ahead. This applies to well-known problems such as widespread social deprivation, persisting population growth, environmental degradation at local, regional and global level, as well as wars and conflicts" (Danida, 1994: 4).

According to Robert Chambers, poverty in development rhetoric is used in two main senses: "In its first common usage, it is a broad, blanket word used to refer to the whole spectrum of deprivation and illbeing; in its second usage, poverty has a narrow technical definition for purposes of measurement and comparison. (...) Poverty is then defined as low income (...) or often as low consumption, which is easier to measure. This is the normal meaning of poverty among economists, and it is used for measuring poverty lines, for comparing groups and regions, and often for assessing progress or backsliding within poverty in development. (...) In much professional discourse the narrow technical definition colonizes the common usage. Income-poverty [including consumption-poverty] starts as a proxy or correlate for other deprivations, but then subsumes them" (Chambers, 1995: 6).

This has also happened in the Danida strategy paper, poverty alleviation strategy no. one being "the promotion of sustainable and socially balanced economic growth" (Danida, 1994: 7). The rationality of the development establishment is straightforward: When (income-) poverty is the problem, economic growth becomes the solution.

² The use of a Danida document for illustration of my point is simply caused by the fact that I am Danish. Danida is no worse, and maybe even better (in terms of sincerity in its attempts to combat global poverty) than most national donor agencies.

In actual fact, however, the relation between poverty and economic growth may be the reverse: Economic growth *producing* poverty, not *alleviating* it. According to Arturo Escobar "massive poverty in the modern sense appeared only when the spread of the market economy broke down community ties and deprived millions of people from access to land, water and other resources. With the consolidation of capitalism, systemic pauperization became inevitable" (Escobar, 1995: 22). Or put in another way by the same author: "All of these rhetorical devices that reflect the 'normal' perception of the [development] planner contribute to obscure the fact that it is precisely the peasants' increasing integration into the modern economy that is at the root of many of their problems.

Even more fundamentally, these statements, which become translated into reality through planning, reproduce the world as the developers know it - a world composed of production and markets, of 'traditional' and 'modern' or developed and underdeveloped sectors, of the need for aid and investment by multinationals..." (Escobar, 1992: 139).

Poverty is produced by capitalist market economy, but it is also produced by development discourse. That this also works at individual level is shown in the following story, told by Helena Norberg-Hodge and quoted by Majid Rahnema: "Helena Norberg-Hodge mentions how the notion of poverty hardly existed in Ladakh when she visited that country for the first time in 1975. 'Today, she says, ' it has become part of the language.' When visiting an outlying village some eight years ago, Helena asked a young Ladakhi where were the poorest houses. 'We have no poor houses in our village,' was the proud reply. Recently, Helena saw the same Ladakhi talking to an American tourist and overheard him say, 'if only you could do something for us; we are so poor!'" (Rahnema, 1992: 161).

Another consequence of the economic measurable definition of poverty issued by the development establishment is that far too easily all what has not been measured comes to be treated as not really real. "Patterns of dominance are then reinforced: of the material over the experiential; of the physical over the social; of the measured and measurable over the unmeasured and unmeasurable; of economic over social values; of economists over discipline concerned with people as people. It then becomes the reductionism of normal economics, not the experiences of the poor

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that defines poverty" (Chambers 1995: 7). An inherent characteristic of all this development concern with poverty is that invariably it is the non-poor who define, measure and write about poverty. "Papers on poverty are commissioned for conferences and roundtables, for symposia and summits. One may speculate on what topics the poor and powerless would commission papers if they could convene conferences and summits: perhaps on greed, hypocrisy and exploitation?" (Chambers, 1995: 5).

What is the case in the real world is, of course, that the poor do not convene conferences, and those papers are rarely written. Chambers, however, maintains the above question as a challenge; in a way he sets a new agenda for development studies: " Any practical analysis has to examine the whole system: 'us' the powerful, as well as 'them' the powerless. Since we have more power to act, *it is hard to evade the imperative to turn the spotlight round and look at ourselves*" (Chambers, 1995: 6, emphasis added, SA). In a way this is - at least to some extent - what the new focus on development discourse is doing: turning the spotlight round, looking at ourselves, critically investigating the ways we are conceptualizing development, asking about implicit assumptions and relations of power, and looking at the effects of such conceptualizations.

Whatever the definition of poverty, statistical evidence shows steeply increasing inequalities in income between rich and poor, as a consequence of global capitalism and economic growth. This kind of facts, however, do not disturb the gangs of virtue. The uphill struggle only makes their heroic efforts of combating poverty so much more impressive. Not unlike Kipling's White Hero, up against 'sloth and heathen folly'.

The sloth and heathen folly of today take a number of different forms, all making the life of the development expert difficult: "In many developing countries poverty problems, environmental degradation, over-utilization of natural resources, poor health conditions and high population growth rates in combination produce a negative dynamic. (...) A weak administrative capacity, characterized by inadequate and incompetent leadership, corruption, ethnic conflicts and religious intolerance, contribute to accentuating these problems" (Danida, 1994:5). Resolute and determined action by the development expert (the White Hero) is badly needed: "Unless concerned efforts are made to initiate comprehensive reforms and

maintain a significant level of development assistance, development towards the year 2000 indicates a worsening situation in Sub-Saharan Africa. (...) We do have a responsibility to engage in the course of development, not least in Africa..." (Danida 1994: 4, 2). As elsewhere in development thinking the subject is us, the rich countries, the donors, the development experts. We must step in order to clear up the mess.

Five characteristics of development discourse

Characteristic for this way of thinking is in the first place the *they-have-the-problem-we-have-the-solution* approach. Invariably this is how it is seen. We have knowledge, they are ignorant. The subject/object division is straightforward. All the noble words on partnership and participation only indicate that they - rhetorically at least - are granted access to the solution of their own problems (on our terms). That *we* should have problems for the solution of which *their* knowledge might be useful - this is not a suggestion to be taken seriously. Cultural exchange, OK, but that is as far as it goes.

A second characteristic of this line of thought is its *immunity to adverse facts*. In Kurtz' case eloquence was one thing, what actually took place was quite another. Contemporary development rhetoric goes one step further: First it neglects adverse effects of development activity, and secondly it interprets austere realities as yet another justification for development action. Year after year reports are published by UNDP and even by the World Bank showing that in spite of all development aid the flow of money from the poor countries to the rich (in debt repayment and in payment for goods) is far bigger than the flow in the opposite direction; the poor are subsidizing the rich and not the other way round; the gap between rich and poor is increasing, the poor are getting poorer, the rich get richer, etc. It would be obvious on this background to consider something fundamentally wrong and in need of serious rethinking. But this is not what happens. Instead the answer is *more of the same*. And somehow growing impoverishment and desolation, largely created as a consequence of the power inequalities in the North/South relationship in the first place,

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emerge in development rhetoric as yet another edition of 'sloth and heathen folly', posing yet a challenge to the Hero.

The development expert as the agent is a third characteristic, connected to the they-have-the-problems-we-have-the-solution approach. We have the solutions, and the ones entrusted with carrying them out are the development experts. In an interesting paper Durre Ahmed (1995) elaborates on the Myth of the Hero in a First World/Third World context. The Hero is white and male. The development expert may be a woman and she may be non-white; this does not change the basic pattern of white maleness: "The issue is not of being literally a man or a woman, but of a type of consciousness at work" (Ahmed, 1995: 89). Durre Ahmed points to a series of interconnected dichotomies active in Western thinking. The Hero is the subject of science, from the Renaissance onwards busy discovering and conquering *outer* nature. The natural scientist and the colonial explorer are Heroes par excellence. In Freudian theory the Hero's explorations take a new turn, now conquering *inner* nature, the goal being expansion of Reason: Where Id is there Ego shall be (Ahmed, 1995: 85). Durre Ahmed makes a connection between geography and psyche, drawing parallels between the South and the unconscious. Both are seen by the Hero as dark, alien, irrational, potentially scaring; they must be conquered, tamed, rationalized, ordered and mastered. Behind the dichotomies of Reason and North vs. Irrational and South, lurks the master dichotomy of Male/Female. The rationality of the Hero leaves "no space for anything feminine, intermediate, ambiguous, metaphorical" (Ahmed, 1995: 85). Nor does development discourse.

A fourth characteristic, closely connected to the previous one, is *the development expert as male*. At Conrad's time at the turn of the century the sexist undertones in the colonial exploration were fairly explicit. Freud had spoken of femininity as a dark continent: mysterious, unmapped, to be explored. And the colonial explorers (male of course) perceived Africa in terms of a female body to be conquered, "penetration followed by possession" (Patteson, quoted in Scott, 1989: 77). In a perceptive reading of Rider Haggard's colonial 'romances', King Solomon's Mines among others (published in 1885) Rebecca Scott shows how Haggard, like Conrad, features the quest motif. "Usually a band of men must journey into the centre of Africa in search of

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something or someone. They travel into unknown territory and certain danger. Their physical and moral strengths will be tested at every point of the quest in a series of tests. The quest motif becomes a quest for and initiation into manhood: a confirmation of virility" (Scott, 1989: 71). The treasure map, central to Haggard's tale, forms an image of a female body. In the map, printed in all the countless editions of this evergreen adventure story, the 'body' is turned upside down, and presumably its sexual connotations remained subconscious to Haggard himself. Nevertheless, once you have noticed it, the symbolism is striking: "The explorers must travel through Sheba's Breasts [two remarkably peaked snowclad mountains] down Solomon's Road to a triangle of mountains (...) where they must descend into the earth, into a pit, to find the treasure" (Scott, 1989: 77). In Rider Haggard's prose Freud and Stanley converge.

Of course present day development experts, distinguished economists in air conditioned offices, are a far cry from 19th century adventurers and explorers. And yet maybe not so far. Their economic way of thinking has a distinct male bias. Even development policies focusing explicitly on women: Women in Development, WID, are male biased, as pointed out by Naila Kabeer: In development policies what counts is production, money and market, exemplified by the WID policy of income generating activities. Other types of activities like mothering and caring are relegated to the realm of instincts rather than institutions (Kabeer, 1994: 28). Furthermore, development policies overlooks the gendered constitution of rationality and agency. "The WID objective was to demonstrate that in the marketplace women were as good as men; that men could be as good as women did not, in this context, appear to be an important consideration. Hence the overriding emphasis on women's capacity to display rational economic behaviour without any equivalent emphasis on men's potential for displaying 'feminine' qualities of caring and nurturing" (Kabeer, 1994: 29). Kabeer sees in these implicit priorities an "incorporation of the value-laden dichotomy between mind and body into the WID world-view" (Kabeer 1994: 29). As in colonial times mind and rationality are male and important, body and femininity unimportant and redundant, if not outright dangerous.

Another line of continuity from colonial ways of thinking to the present day can be identified in the development approach

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to nature conservation. Here a nature / culture dichotomy seems to be at work. An idea of pure, unspoilt nature versus cultivated or (even worse) urbanized land, is extended into yet another dichotomy of the 'good native', traditional and living in and with nature 'amicably amongst the game' (Neumann, 1997: 14) versus the 'bad native', modernized and nature destroying (Neumann, 1997: 3). The irony of conservation politics is that the 'good native' in this context is the 'bad native' (traditionalist, backward) in others, and vice versa.

A fifth and final characteristic of development discourse is *the exclusion of indigenous experience and knowledge*. In the Danida document there is no hint of the development process as experienced and felt 'from below', from those who are defined as having the problems, from the 'objects' of development activities. "The influence of African land users over the way in which environmental change is conceived in the development process appears rather small (...) Received wisdom pays little heed to the perceptions of indigenous herders" (Leach and Mearns 1996: 9). This is exactly the point: "[Development] planning ensures a functioning of power that relies on, and helps to produce, a type of reality which is certainly not that of the peasants, while peasant cultures and struggles are rendered invisible" (Escobar, 1992: 139). "Science and planning, on the other hand, are seen as neutral, desirable and universally applicable" (Escobar, 1992:136). The situation is not perceived as one type of knowledge against another, but as science and rationality against irrationality and ignorance. Indigenous knowledge may be granted existence in very limited fields, eg. regarding medical plants - a type of knowledge with potentials of commercial exploitation - and in the case of the 'good native' in the nature conservation example above. But even where indigenous *knowledge* is acknowledged, indigenous *experience* is not.

Unlike most development researchers Marshall Berman discusses the interlinked processes of development and modernity *as experience*. Berman has not forgotten the historical experience of modernity in his own society, the USA, and in his own life. To be modern, he says, "is to find ourselves in an environment that promises us adventure, power, joy, growth, transformation of ourselves and the world - and at the same time, that threatens to destroy everything we have, everything

we know, everything we are" (Berman, 1982: 15). The process not just seen from the lofty viewpoint of the development expert - but from the points of view of the men and women who suffer and enjoy these changes.

Seeing development as ambiguities of creation and destruction, of promises and threats, suggests another reading of the Helena Norberg-Hodge story of poverty above. The way the story is told by Majid Rahnema is how it was seen by Helena Norberg-Hodge. Seen from the young Ladakhi's point of view, however, the advent of 'development' has introduced the notion of poverty, but also at the same time a notion of possible change. This latter notion is quickly picked up by the young Ladakhi, who once having seen the possibilities of change doesn't hesitate to go for it. The problem of the tale - keeping the above ambiguities in mind - is not the fact of possible change, but the pre-defined *direction* of this change, its rationality, measurability, exclusion of what is 'intermediate, ambiguous, metaphorical', its pushing into oblivion what happens to fall outside the scope of Western-style modernization.

Development rhetoric - symbol and ritual?

Focusing again on development rhetoric there are more intriguing questions to be asked. Its relation to Third World reality is dubious. There is much talk of strategy and planning and all the noble deeds that we are committed to achieve. But the actual results of the efforts are not particularly convincing. Even within its own very limited scope the result of Danish poverty combat is not impressive. What appears most successful seems to be the production of a standardized image of Third World realities, basically in terms of a series of lacks: lack of economic growth, lack of health, lack of education etc. - and characterized by poverty, social deprivation, population pressure and environmental degradation.

A recent evaluation of the poverty alleviation aspect of Danish development assistance pointed out that in spite of the overall principle of poverty orientation in Danish development aid, "there was neither ubiquitous nor explicit poverty orientation reflected in most of the project designs or documentation of the

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selected interventions assessed. (...) the assessment findings indicated that there is a risk that the specific poverty orientation gets 'overshadowed' by other considerations during the implementation process" (Danida, 1996: viii). There seems to be more scope for elaborations on poverty alleviation in overall strategy papers, and less when it comes to project implementation. Is that to say that some of the poverty-talk is mainly rhetoric, circulating at central levels but not really bothering locally placed Danida people? This kind of results emerge from a Swedish investigation, undertaken by an independent researcher, which means that it has been possible to focus directly at development rhetoric *as rhetoric*. (Eva Evers Rosander, 1992). This is not possible to the same extent in a commissioned evaluation, where you have to respect the rules of the game and the Terms of Reference handed over to you together with the assignment. The development establishment cannot question its own basic assumptions, little as it can see the limitations of its own rhetoric.

The Swedish investigation shows that development aid and the accompanying development rhetoric serves symbolic and ideological functions relatively independently of what is happening on the ground, in the development projects. Development eloquence has a life of its own, serving its own purposes. You may even get the feeling that development rhetoric is *legitimated* by project activities in the field, more than the rhetoric is *directing* such activities, even if this is what the rhetoric itself pretends to be doing.

The following statement by a SIDA director is unusual for its frankness about (and insight into) this *symbolic aspect* of development aid: "Development aid plays a political role both for the donors and the recipients; development aid is a symbolic act. Evidently this is also the case in Sweden. Development is part of Swedish foreign policy and gives Sweden a presence and a power in international relations which we would otherwise lack" (Carl Tham, 1987, quoted in Rosander, 1992: 65) Here it is openly admitted that development aid is not just about altruistic poverty alleviation, but also about donor prestige, power and self-esteem.

In the Rosander investigation the *symbolic and almost ritual* aspects come forward quite strongly. 'People's participation' as a development strategy in vogue in the 1980'es, played at the time of the investigation a major role at SIDA headquarters level and

in strategy papers, but it had virtually no influence on work on the ground, where the development projects were actually carried out. The investigation shows that "the dedication to participatory issues among those employed in a particular project increases, the greater their physical distance from the active implementation of the project" (Rosander 1992: 37). It is suggested that talking about 'people's participation' is *not* an exhortation to action, but that such talk constitutes *an act in itself* - a symbolic act confirming basic values of the Swedish people and polishing the national image internally as well as externally. The concepts of people's participation "reflect the Swedish self-image as the advocate of democracy, equality and responsibility towards the poor" (Rosander, 1992: 41).

Similarly regarding Danish development aid. In the Scandinavian societies public values like democracy and people's participation are very important. As they are increasingly glossed over in domestic politics, where lots of crucial decisions are in fact taken by multinational corporations or undemocratic boards, it appears the more important and convenient to be able to maintain the ideals by reference to benevolent and altruistic endeavours in far-away places.

This is one concern: When the nation state and its democracy as such is crumbling, to maintain the national ideals. Another related concern, pointed out by Rosander, is the endeavour not to lag too far behind the international *gang of virtue*, ie. to keep up with international trends and fashions in development rhetoric. These fashions change fast, as everybody acquainted with development work will know. To this end a number of headquarter people will be engaged in interpretation and adaptation of international strategies and position papers. At SIDA headquarters, "the specialists on participatory issues were instrumental in elaborating and adapting the aid ideology of international authorities into Swedish analogues and in producing manifestos for Swedish and international development audiences" (Rosander, 1992: 50). The image that comes to mind is one of lines of little monks in a medieval convent copying and adapting the holy texts for local use. According to Rosander's analysis "the SIDA headquarters programme officers' talk about people's participation in meetings, missions and seminars was symbolic action, *doing*" (Rosander, 1992: 59, emphasis in original). Here we have the monks again, going to mass, saying the holy prayer. The holy texts, however, are produced, read and talked about only at central level. For people

engaged in practical activities they have no meaning. The lofty talk fits local conditions badly, and headquarters do not facilitate implementation. A participatory approach in the project activities would demand flexibility and improvisation. But this does not match the insistence from SIDA headquarters on a rigorous following of plans of implementation. The only exception from the general rule of "a correlation between commitment to and interest in people's participation and physical distance from the project and its practical concerns" (Rosander 1002: 47) are the (few) socio-economists employed on the projects, who seemed to be the only ones taking seriously the proclamations regarding 'participation'. Following Rosander their presence can in itself be interpreted as a rhetorical device (Rosander, 1992: 64). As a support for this point of view she points to the relative lack of commitment on the part of the headquarters staff to the conclusions and recommendations of the socio-economists reports.

Thinking beyond development discourse

Many of the most innovative contributions to discussions of North/South relations and critique of development discourse originate from intellectuals that are *outsiders within* (Patricia Hill Collins, 1990), ie. with a foot in each of the two worlds, North and South. From their Western education they know the hegemonic Western discourse, but at the same time they know and make a point of not losing touch with their culture of origin and its way of thinking and acting. Edward Said is an example: "Belonging, as it were, to both sides of the imperial divide enables you to understand them more easily" (Said, 1993: xxx). Based in this position Said introduces what he calls a *contrapuntal perspective*, seeing it as his "interpretative political aim (...) to make concurrent those views and experiences that are ideologically and culturally closed to each other, and that attempt to distance or suppress other views and experiences" (Said, 1993: 37).

Said's program of contrapuntal perspective is applied by Claude Alvares, another 'outsider within', in juxtaposing modern science and village life, emphasizing again *experience*: "No work of academia can be as compelling as human experience.

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(...) If one attempts to live close to the peasants or within the bosom of nature, modern science is perceived differently: as vicious, arrogant, politically powerful, wasteful, violent, unmindful of other ways. Life in Thane, a village north-east of the state of Goa, on India's West Coast (...) provided me with enough education to see through the emperor's new clothes" (Alvares, 1993: 232).

Talking about modern use of Western scientific rationality Alvares applies a metaphor: The emperor's new clothes. The story by Hans Christian Andersen is a story about ordinary people believing in absurdities, against their own experience, just because the absurdities are backed by power and consensus. The child in the story, an outsider in relation to the power/consensus nexus, by disregarding the established hegemony concerning the emperor's clothes, is giving voice to shared but hidden doubts. Contemporary Third World 'outsiders within' are also disregarding and criticising the hegemony. They are not immediately building a new consensus, but it may come. Third World, feminist, and other critique of the inherent male and Western bias in so-called objective, value free and gender neutral scientific rationality, correspond to the experience of many people, even in the West. The 'rationality' of 'economic man', which lies at the roots of economic thinking, has not much in common with priorities and realities of people's daily lives. 'Economic man' always optimises gain, while men and women do take care of young children and ageing parents, even in the West. According to Alvares the "narrow and biased scientific rationality has precious little to do with how the human mind actually thinks." (Alvares, 1993: 228). At this point he is supported by Durre Ahmed, who talking about metaphors and myths has this to say: "The mythologies found in almost every culture can be considered traditional models of the enormous diversity of the human psyche. What are seen as irrational stories by the modern mind are in fact *different styles of consciousness*, each uniquely embodies and suggesting different attitudes/perspectives to life, events, knowledge and relationships (Ahmed, 1995: 82; emphasis in original).

Somebody might point out that Alvares above, using the tale of a Western author as source for a metaphor, is showing himself as a victim of exactly the Western hegemony which he wishes to criticise. But this is not the case. He is being inspired by a fairy

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tale, by a story, a way of thinking and talking which is not and cannot be hegemonical. Thinking and arguing in terms of stories and tales may be more to the point, and closer to "how human minds actually think", than scientific rationality.

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