# Restudy and Reflexivity in Anthropology and Development

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*On reflection, this presentation worries me for several reasons* – James Fairhead

## Introduction

This essay examines three very different articles, on three very different subjects. What can David Mosse's piece on 'The Making and Marketing of Participatory Development' (2003) in Northern India, James Fairhead's article on bean farmers in Zaire, 'Representing Knowledge, the 'new farmer' in research fashions' (1993), and 'Women's Farming and Present Ethnography' (1995), by Jane Guyer, looking at female farming in Nigeria, have linking them so explicitly as to form the basis of an argument? The answer is that they are all anthropological restudies.

'We all know nowadays that a writer's authority cannot be taken for granted' (Allen 2000: 244). The post-modern movement in anthropology and development has stripped away concepts of objectivity and truth, especially since the *Writing Culture* (1986) revolution started exploring the implications of the fact that ethnography 'is always caught up in the invention, not the representation, of cultures' (Clifford and Marcus 1986: 2). Fardon added to the debate with *Localizing Strategies* (1990), which responded to Clifford and Marcus's emphasis on the deconstruction of ethnographies as textual, partial accounts, with a call for attention to be paid to the contexts and conditions of anthropological research. Building on these and other 'reflexive' critiques, self-conscious fieldwork accounts have proliferated, drawing attention to the human and subjective nature of the ethnographic process and of anthropological 'knowledge' itself. However, as De Neve points out, reflexivity itself 'has remained remarkably devoid of any coherent definition or systematic application' (forthcoming). It is sometimes accused of slipping into mere 'confessional literature' (Fardon 1990: 28), of getting lost in its own emphasis on subjectivity, and being concerned only with the textual deconstruction of ethnographies as invention, and has been dismissed by many anthropologists as unproductive solipsism. If reflexivity has often been dismissed in anthropology, it has gained even less attention in 'development' (by which, for ease of reference, I mean those state, inter-state, and non-state organisations devoted to the reduction of human poverty and inequality). However, in a sector increasingly famed for changing approaches, trends, or even fads, there seems to be great potential and use for critical re-assessment, both of these changing policies and of the development world itself; its practices, power and impacts. But what form and what application would such 'reflexivity' take?

Any development or anthropological restudy may be defined as 'reflexive', under the current confusion in definition and usage, simply in that it looks back in time and assesses earlier theories. In this essay I shall explore three articles in which anthropologists previously working in development or a development context return to their earlier work, to test this assumption that restudy = reflexivity, and to come to a clearer definition of 'reflexivity' in the process. Thus, in a sense, we return to our original question: what do these three pieces have in common? Investigating the different and similar ways in which these anthropologists reflect upon their work can reveal the defining concerns and characteristics of 'reflexivity', how comparatively reflexive each is, and indeed how possible reflexivity is to truly achieve. I do not here attempt a review of the reflexive school in anthropology (see De Neve,

forthcoming, for such an analysis), but seek to address the meaning, the use and potential of reflexivity in anthropology *in* development and for an anthropology *of* development today.

An etymological exploration is a traditionally a good starting point in trying to assess and define meaning. The word 'reflexive' comes from the Latin 'reflexus', meaning 'bent back', which in turn comes from 'reflectere'; 'to reflect'. We thus need to explore several different meanings coming into play in different ways in anthropological-developmental reflexivity. Reflexivity requires reflection in terms of deep and extended thought, and it is implied that one is reflecting back upon the past. A mirror, pool or text reflect the world in shimmering images; reflexive study is typified by a concern with images and representations, the fluid and constructed nature of meaning, and whether one can really get beyond representations to an ultimate signified or truth. In grammar, reflexivity means having an identical subject and direct object (as in the phrase 'she watched herself'), and reflexive study implies that focus is bent back upon the anthropologist and the production of anthropological knowledge, rather than a purely external 'other'. Reflection may be opposed to action, and this assumption must be investigated. Collins English dictionary lists 'implicit or explicit attribution of credit or blame' as a definition of reflection (as in 'it will reflect on him'), reminding us of the responsibility that the creators of images of the world must take for their representations. Finally, adding yet another dimension to this hall of mirrors of meaning, reflex is an 'immediate involuntary response', suggesting that reflexivity is something inherent in human nature, and perhaps also, in this context, in anthropology. Each of these senses need to be assessed and explored to come to an understanding of the use and concept of anthropological reflexivity in development.

**'On reflection'**

All three of the pieces look back in time to work completed some period before the time of writing. Jane Guyer (1995) physically returns to Nigeria in the 1990s in order to collect new data to assess changes in Yoruba women's farming since her original studies of the 1970s, and how these relate to the previously dominant development theory of evolutionism. David Mosse (2003) is also looking back over a long time; his involvement in the DFID Indian participatory development project he analyses here started in 1991, ended in 1998, and he returned to evaluate it for DFID in 2001. James Fairhead (1993) looks back over a shorter period; his research into Zaire farmer understandings of crop failure was conducted from 1986-88. However, Fairhead said in interview (2004) that it had been written somewhat before this, and that in fact the space of time between research and the start of 'restudy' was not great. We thus face one of two options; either Fairhead's piece is not particularly reflexive, or temporality is not a vital element in reflexivity. What, then, is the role that time actually plays in encouraging or enabling reflection? Time reveals the changing trends in anthropology and development and enables one to see, reflexively, the problems and contradictions inherent in a particular paradigm that one could not see at the time, be it evolutionism, the indigenous technical knowledge (ITK) debate, or participatory development. Such a new perspective also enables anthropologists to see how such now-outdated theories affected and defined how they represented the subjects of their research or reports– representational problematics that Fairhead is well aware of, as we shall see. Passage of time in itself therefore is not the defining feature of reflexivity, so much as a realisation of the specific and general ways in which the anthropologist emphasised or excluded certain aspects of their research in response to changing theory, or indeed the personal or institutional factors affecting their research choices from the first. Paradoxically, in fact, just as a mirror reflects what is before it in the present moment, not what has gone, so reflections are

responses to *new* debates and changes in theoretical thinking, reflexivity as way of engaging with the *current* world.

One of the concerns of reflexivity is with the way in which the world is *reflected* and represented in the text. Such an interpretation is in line with Clifford and the *Writing Culture* school of reflexivity, which stresses that ethnographies are always 'fictions' and that '"cultures" do not hold still for their portraits. Attempts to make them do so always involve simplification and exclusion, selection of a temporal focus, the construction of a particular self-other relationship, and the imposition or negotiation of a power relationship' (Clifford 1986: 10). While Clifford refers specifically to ethnography, on a broader scale this applies to all representation in spoken or written discourse. This concern is one of those considered by Mosse when he says that

> I need to reflect on two different roles or positions which stand in tension. The first is my 'constructive role' in the framing of development policy and project discourse, its signs and representations… The second of my roles involves not the making of project myths and symbols, but their participant deconstruction, the dislodging of certainties. (Mosse 2003: 52).

This passage indicates that meaning is constructed, in that Mosse admits his 'constructive role' in 'framing' and 'making'. While 'participant observation' once claimed to record objective accounts of cultures, 'participant deconstruction' stresses that objective accounts do not exist, and that all we can do is dismantle our constructed images of the world to identify the play of authority and power within them. Mosse equates 'development policy and project discourse, its signs and representations', with 'project myths and symbols'. James Ferguson's definition of myth may be useful here:

> First there is the popular usage, which takes a myth to be a false or factually inaccurate version of things that has come to be widely believed. Second, there is the anthropological use of the term, which focuses on the story's social function: a myth in this sense is not just a mistaken account but a cosmological blueprint that lays down fundamental categories and meanings for the organization and interpretation of experience.' (Ferguson, 1999: 13).

In this sense 'myth', 'anthropological theory', and 'development policy' can all be seen to fulfil a similar function in that all constitute a written or spoken representation of the world, define the terms of interpretation, and yet may not (do not) represent empirical situations 'accurately'. Exploration of anthropological theory, development policy and project discourse as myth, as 'false or factually inaccurate version', asks how such discourses are created and sustained, and also in what ways they organise and interpret experience. They may reflect the world, but like even the stillest pool, they have their distortions. Such an examination is reflexive in that it is concerned with the nature of reflections, with the relation between representation and reality, policy and practice, myth and history. To what extent to Mosse, Fairhead and Guyer approach development-anthropological discourse in this fashion?

Mosse (2003) explores concepts of discourse and practice through analysis of the DFID Indo-British Rainfed Farming Project. His involvement dates to the project design stages, in writing the project proposal, which, he claims, 'represented people and places as embodiments of those development problems which are amenable to the donor's currently favoured 'technical' solutions' (2003: 61). The project model duly presents complex local situations and communities as 'a people in need of participation'. In the case of programme policy, textualisation (inscription in discourse) creates both the terms and the conditions for

the project to take place. Policy however, Mosse argues, does not drive practice: 'project models can be understood as primarily concerned to retain the impression (the myth?) of project rationality; the impression that is of causal linkage and manageability in the face of its absence.' (2003: 67). They impose workable, unificatory models on a chaotic world, but cannot dictate practice. He explores this through the metaphor of 'participation' itself. The project model establishes participation as the keystone of success, and indeed the definition of success. However, 'the timely delivery of project outputs… had become far too important to be left to *participatory* (i.e. farmer-managed) processes.' (2003: 58) 'Participation' is a myth in that it is not 'true' (as a practice it is not really occurring), but it also functions as something that the interpretive community of the project all believe in and use to define the terms of success/ failure (if participation = success, failure = lack of participation). As long as 'participation' remains the dominant trend the project is 'successful', because the model ideologically establishes the link.

In the wake of DFID policy changes, in 2001, Mosse found himself back in India, now evaluating why the project that he left as a 'success' in 1998 is now defined as a 'failure'. 'A fundamental change *had* occurred, not in the project, but in the donor policy which the project was required to affirm in order to exist', out of time, out of trend, it had become 'the flared trousers of the DFID wardrobe.' (2003: 72). The article does not just explore the disjunction between the model and the reality (the metaphor of participation and its actual absence) but also the way that the model has a power of its own (for instance the definition of success/ failure and the concurrent support or closure of the project). Mosse's piece furthers our understanding of reflexivity: it is concerned with policy as more than insufficient representation; discourse is not socially-divorced or irrelevant, but holds power to define and change societies, power that must be examined and revealed.

The very title of Fairhead's piece, 'Representing Knowledge, the 'new farmer' in research fashions' (1993), betrays a central concern with the changing 'fashions' and nature of representation. Fairhead was employed by the organisation Centro Internacional de Agricultura Tropical (CIAT) to liaise with Zairian bean farmers and to incorporate their valuable 'indigenous technical knowledge' and understanding of crop failure into agricultural research, through the writing of reports on this subject to CIAT. Importantly, for this analysis, the image of the modern and innovative indigenous farmer is one that *already exists* prior to Fairhead's reports. As Fairhead points out, 'ITK was coined and constructed to help convince researchers that there are benefits to be had from working with farmers who, it has been 'found', were intelligent and not ignorant about farming' (1993: 191). The image is thus constructed with a particular agenda: to promote the incorporation of farmers into research and development, and to do this by proving to the 'developers' that the farmers are 'intelligent and not ignorant'. This involves the rejection of the old myth of the ignorant, traditionalist farmer (a figure whose ancestors are the 'primitive savages' of colonial times), and the construction of a new representation. Fairhead demonstrates the ways in which this is as much a myth as the ignorant savage, and finally explores the socio-political consequences of the representation.

Fairhead is interested in the role that dominant discourses play in such representations. The image of the new farmer, created to appeal to scientific research organisations, is a rational, 'modern' farmer with the maximum amount of (shared) knowledge; not one who may engage in farming practices or beliefs that the organisation might define as superstitions, myths, or local customs and politics. The discourse of the agricultural research organisation discredits such explanations as they do not conform to the 'rational' expectations of science, and they are easily expunged from the researchers' reports; not purposeful exclusions, but perhaps seen

as irrational and therefore not sufficiently important, or worse, too close to the old image of the superstitious tribal farmer.

Myths carry meaning, and are political in that they attempt to impose a particular reading upon the world over others.  This is true of both of Ferguson's definitions of myth; indeed it is the point at which the two converge.  Fairhead explores his role in creating and sustaining the myth of the new farmer, the ways in which it is factually inaccurate (presenting farmers as having a shared system of traditional knowledge, hiding creativity, attributing knowledge where it does not exist, and making farming seem disembedded from local socio-political situations), and the (intentional or unintentional) 'function' of the myth, which he locates in 'the way that difference and distinction between researchers and farmers is mythically constructed according to their different types of knowledge.'  In establishing a distinction between 'science' and 'ITK', in which ITK is seen as subordinate, social distance between groups of people is created and maintained.  By comparing the development discourse about ITK and the Bwisha myths about 'women's ways' (both are intuitive, compulsive, and fallible), Fairhead makes it explicit that the ITK discourse is mere myth itself, and one that creates and continues inequalities of power between peoples, be they men and women, or farmers and researchers.  He calls for such myths of difference to be exposed, and starts the process of deconstruction in his own work.  Fairhead's piece is highly reflexive in the terms so far defined.  It demonstrates a concern not merely with textual representations, but with the ways very real power relationships are made and maintained through definitions of status or value created 'only' in discourse.

Guyer is also aware that discourse affects interpretation by defining the terms of the investigation.  In 'Women's Farming and Present Ethnography' (1995) she revisits her early work on two African farming communities, that the then-popular (now-discredited) evolutionary model classified into two different categories.  She tells us that 'analysis was based on the typological distinction between the two, and the conclusion tended to reaffirm it' (1995: 27).  She returns to Nigeria, conducts new research, and reinterprets the development of the gender division of labour in Africa according to models emphasising human agency and the socio-political economic nature of action.  As she herself says, half with perceptiveness and half with a seeming blindness to her own interpretive position, 'evolution has been replaced by history, but not completely and not yet entirely coherently' (1995: 35).  The comment is perceptive because this has indeed been the interpretive trend, and blind because she ignores the fact that she is constructing and strengthening this new model in this in this very paper.  When she admits that 'the present results are provisional', when she comments that the 'changes and persistences seem far more diverse, surprising and intellectually stimulating than the models can cope with' (1995: 35), Guyer decides not to investigate the implications of the fact that this will always be the case.

Guyer's article establishes a binary that contrasts theory and ethnography, a binary that correlates with a distinction between discourse and 'reality': 'as we struggled to apply what was in those days the only 'theory' available, more and more of the propositions became questionable when matched against the findings from that other strand of the anthropological tradition: the empirical acuity and openness of ethnographic method' (1995: 28).  In terms of assessing reflexivity, this statement presents two problems.  Firstly, to call the ethnographic process empirically acute and open is in opposition to a *Writing Culture* understanding of the ethnographic text, which emphasises simplifications, exclusions, selections, constructions and negotiations of power.  One of the main points of Guyer's article is that 'the selection of a temporal focus' changes interpretation of data.  Despite this, and despite even her acknowledgement of 'the danger of turning too quickly to familiar models', she stops at advocating that anthropologists become more experimental, rather than turning her

'ethnographic gaze' upon the conditions and methods of the production of anthropological ethnography, theory and discourse itself. Her piece is reflexive in that it looks back and challenges an earlier representation, but it stops short of analysing the nature of all representation.

Our second problem is that reflexivity's concern with representations is based not just in the worry that all images distort, but in the power held within them to create the categories through which the empirical world is interpreted. Guyer's above statement notes the disjunction between models and realities, yet attributes this to the failure or insufficiency of theory to explain the world, while Mosse and Fairhead understand discourse as itself shaping and defining, laying down 'fundamental categories and meanings for the organization and interpretation of experience.' Ultimately, she does not deconstruct her own 'constructive role' in the creation of anthropological myths; where they come from or what power they have, how development workers and anthropologists strengthen and support them though their interpretive texts (including ethnography), or what processes discredit them. By the very act of gathering new data as the test of theory she demonstrates that her concern is not with the nature of construction and representation, but with achieving a correlative truth between theory and reality. Her cry is not 'on reflection, this presentation worries me' but 'on restudy, this interpretation is wrong'.

On these criteria, I would define Mosse and Fairhead's pieces as highly reflexive, and Guyer's less so. All three look back in time, and all three devote extended thought to earlier actions and theory. All three emphasise subjectivity and reassess their representations of the 'other' in their earlier work, but while Guyer is engaged in searching for new theories to define and explain, Mosse and Fairhead look at the ways in which models of the world do define and explain, even when (as all three agree) it is accepted that models and 'reality' do not conform. Guyer's activity in collecting new information actually undermines her reflexivity. Indeed, in a sense, restudy is the opposite of reflexivity in that reflection implies thought as opposed to action. In this new light, Mosse and Fairhead's pieces are actually not restudies, rather reflections, questioning what was previously taken for granted; this, as we shall see, includes anthropology and development themselves.

Reflexive sentences take the same subject and object, and reflexive anthropological accounts do the same thing: anthropology itself, its regional and theoretic traditions, its texts and methods, its power and its history, come under the 'ethnographic gaze'. 'If all representation is party to preconstructed terms of power/ knowledge, then it is unclear that tinkering with individual images makes a great deal of difference.' (Fardon, 1990: 6). In *Localizing Strategies* (1990) Fardon issued a call 'to shift attention from text to context, and to reflect instead on the ways in which disciplinary, institutional and regional contexts shape how fieldwork is undertaken and texts are written.' (De Neve, forthcoming). Perhaps all three of our anthropologists could be described as 'tinkering' in that all three point to ways in which their earlier representations simplified, excluded or emphasised, but I would argue that, in their attention to the relation and interaction between models and the world, both Mosse and Fairhead do more than 'tinkering'; they explore the 'preconstructed terms of power/knowledge' themselves. Their 'others' are not just the texts or discourses of development, but the development projects, their terms, conditions, and social impacts. Reflexivity does not just reflect attention and focus back upon the *text* as other, but upon the whole *anthropological (or development) discipline*. It is essentially what Mosse calls for when he writes of 'a new kind of anthropology, one which situates the production of knowledge about other people, and places it explicitly within the framework of international relations, analysing rather than concealing the political and historical relations or power, and the systems of values that shape representation… Moreover, it does so in a way that places

the anthropologist-actor within the frame, as member of a transnational development community, speaking from within and in the first person.' Reflexivity is not about disclaiming responsibility because all versions are partial or because discourse does not directly represent the world 'as it is': reflexivity is about taking responsibility for the versions of the world that we create, as 'anthropologist-actors' in development, and the power that these versions do have. Reflexivity may situate and study anthropology and anthropological representation, yet it does this not in isolation but in relation to global power systems, not just from solipsistic narcissism, but from a realisation that, as a discipline which claims to work for the benefit of humanity, it must include itself and its impacts in its field of study, especially when involved in the interventionalist development sector. Fairhead emphasises this and makes a similar plea for the development world to be more self-analytical of the ways in which it presents its subjects through the proposals and reports that are, after all, if not blueprints for action then at least justifications of intervention:

> Such reports can be held partially responsible for the continuation, if not the aggravation, of the problem which they purport to try to solve. They perpetuate idealistic and rationalistic development perspectives, which distance the analysis and findings from local, national and international politico-economic structures, and they ignore their own historical and current position within these structures. (1993: 202)

The two, seemingly conflicting, strands of post-modern reflexivity and applied development converge here, 'if not in 'development anthropology', then in the ideas and practices constituting the 'anthropology *of* development'' (Grillo 1997: 2). While Guyer locates anthropology's use in development as helping to ascertain processes of social change, Fairhead and Mosse take this as a given, and demand more of the anthropology-development union.

> What ethnography can offer the policy process is an element of critical reflection, a means to understand in individual cases how, as Mary Douglas writes, 'the work that thought does is social… thought makes cuts and connections between actions'. Perhaps good policy is not implementable, but it is absolutely central to what happens in arenas of development, and it is important to know how. (Mosse EIDOS presentation 2003).

In this sense, reflexivity is the link between anthropology and development, the critical component in working with or within the huge and influential world of 'development' in order to understand the impacts that this sector makes upon the world, and how these can be of the most value to humanity. Reflexivity turns attention upon anthropology and upon development and says: know thyself.

Our penultimate definition of reflexivity, etymologically, was the 'implicit or explicit attribution of credit or blame', and this is a meaning we find coming to the fore here. When Mosse writes 'while writing here analytically, I am also forced to bring moral and political-administrative judgements to bear, to ask again, what are my responsibilities?' (2003: 70); when Fairhead acknowledges that 'an auto-critique of my own reports to CIAT is that, in the aim of reducing social distance, paradoxically, I have also created and reproduced it' (1993: 204), they are accepting that in inscribing the world in discourse, they have created new interpretations that define and affect the empirical world. While Guyer is aware that theories and external situations do not correlate, and indeed is often frustrated by this, she does not examine the relation between the two. She takes responsibility for her work in that she wants to find a truer theory, but she does not investigate the ways in which 'the work thought does is social'.

**Reflexivity, Responsibility and (Re)action**

The anthropologist must take responsibility for the images of the world he or she creates in the production of anthropological knowledge, and for the power that these have to determine social relationships of the grounds of development intervention. The concurrent of this is that the anthropologist must take on another, related, responsibility: to never take anything for granted, but always to question and re-assess, to interrogate ideas and paradigms. The anthropological fieldwork and interpretive process itself is one of reflection. Rabinow speaks of how 'knowledge' about cultures is gathered in his self-reflexive fieldwork account *Reflections on Fieldwork in Morocco*; 'under my systematic questioning, Ali was taking realms of his own world and interpreting them for an outsider. This meant that he, too was spending more time in this liminal, self-conscious world between cultures' (1977: 39). It is only through encouraging informants to reflect upon their own lives, and then reflecting upon the reflections, creating multiple perspectives, that ethnography is produced at all (De Neve, forthcoming). As Dresch and James point out, 'the defining feature is not the label 'anthropologist'. The defining feature is listening for the unsaid, looking for the visually unmarked, sensing the unrepresented, and thus seeking for connections among parts of the obvious which locally remain unstated' (2000: 23). This itself could be a definition of reflexivity; searching for what is missed, questioning the accepted; and it is significant that it is also a definition of anthropology.

This brings us to our last definition, of reflex as 'immediate involuntary response'. Reflexivity is a response mechanism – it is, perhaps most broadly, humanity's capacity to question itself. This post-modern anthropological-development reflexivity is about permanently challenging those things that we take for granted. It is only at the lowest level about the diachronic study of trends as reactions and responses to one another, but is rightly about a synchronic ethnography of development. It is not about returning, but about working and thinking reflexively. In reaction there is action; the boundary becomes blurred. The reflex *is* the action; a present return imbued within reflection.

**Coda**

> The short, self-contained, *self*-reflexive loop advocated in the anthropological theory of the 1980s was not often achievable. The reality was long, ragged chains of *inter*-personal abrasion and mutual support, cross-cutting influences of unanticipated kinds… (Guyer, 1995: 26).

This essay is built upon a paradox: that one must permanently question, yet will never be able to see the current overarching frames of analysis set by the paradigm one works within. Why one should be reflexive is clear, what is more difficult is how.

Despite our dismissal of temporality itself as component of reflexivity, it is of course often retrospectively, from the viewpoints offered by a change of discourse (created by changing one's situation), that one can gain new perspectives upon one's own work. Fairhead, who was a graduate in agricultural sciences before moving towards anthropology, explained how the CIAT project was 'subordinate to the questions of the international community', and how he had been 'looking at farming practices alongside agronomists. It was easy to slot into that; I could speak their language and explore the farming practices in relation to that language'. Mosse writes that 'Development practitioners (including anthropological consultants such as myself), are not so much agents of policy implementation, as members of 'interpretive communities' (Porter 1995), creating and sustaining policy models that reveal, conceal and

give meaning to local activities and events.'  Revisiting a piece reflexively, as Fairhead himself put it, offers 'the chance to shift register, to step away from one paradigmatic mode of thinking into another' (Fairhead, interview, 2004), and thus to dislodge the parameters of judgement, the certainties of the mode.  So change in interpretive community, interdisciplinary dialogue and exchange, and editions that provide this space for critical reflection are important contributors to reflexivity.  We must accept also that there is a limit upon how self-reflexive an individual can be, and as all three of our anthropologists would agree, the process of dislodging certainties must be cooperative and continuous.

Reflexivity is a constant process of questioning the world.  But the very reason one must do this is because one can never see everything, the position one holds always has blind spots and assumptions we are not aware of.  We must keep on thinking and challenging, just as I will have to come back to this assessment to see the ways in which I have emphasised, simplified or excluded in this representation.

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