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Irony in Action

Anthropology, Practice,
and the Moral Imagination

Edited by

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The University of Chicago Press
Chicago and London

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The University of Chicago Press, Chicago 60637
The University of Chicago Press, Ltd., London
© 2001 by The University of Chicago
Printed in the United States of America
10 09 08 07 06 05 04 03 02 01 5 4 3 2 1

ISBN (cloth) : 0-226-24422-9
ISBN (paper) : 0-226-24423-7

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Irony in action : anthropology, practice, and the moral imagination / edited by James W. Fernandez and Mary Taylor Huber.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-226-24422-9 (cloth) — ISBN 0-226-24423-7 (pbk.)

1. Irony in anthropology. I. Fernandez, James W. II. Huber, Mary Taylor, 1944—GN34.2 .I76 2001

301—dc21

00-011904

Ⓢ The paper used in this publication meets the minimum requirements of the American National Standard for Information Sciences—Permanence of Paper for Printed Library Materials, ANSI Z39.48-1992.

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Chapter Three

JAMES W. FERNANDEZ

The Irony of Complicity and the Complicity of Irony in Development Discourse

"Nobody smiled at these colossal ironies!"
Mark Twain, *Life on the Mississippi* (1990: 8)

Colossal Ironies and Their Correction

Early on in his *Life on the Mississippi*, a historical and anecdotal account full of the flow of Mark Twain's sardonic and dissolving humor,¹ the author recounts the "colossal irony" of how, for mere trinkets, millenarian religious promises, and by catering to and trading in on Indian credulity and weakness for drink, Europeans got unto themselves the vast lands drained and watered by the Great River. By this "robbery" they gained untold riches. Indeed, one might add that in a government (in its first 150 years) so circumspect and reserved in collecting taxes, the major source of wealth was the sale of these cheaply bartered Indian lands;² this is a fact which Americans, as Twain relates—and even unto this day—have great difficulty in recognizing, along, of course, with the requirements of fair compensation. A hundred years later, at the turn of the twenty-first century, Twain surely would be interested to observe the fate of the great river boats whose churning progress lay at the heart of river life as he

1. Twain's thoroughgoing ironic stance about American, indeed human, character has not always been easy to grasp, witness the recent attempt to suppress *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* in the schools because of the figure of Nigger Jim. Yet Jim, it can be argued, is the only true person of character and honor in the novel in comparison with the parade of white reprobates, liars, frauds, swindlers, lynchers and murderers he and Huck encounter. Unless that irony is grasped, the "Adventure" seems satirical at best and ridiculing at worst! (See Baker 1982: A23).

2. My colleague Raymond Fogelson, as knowledgeable about Native American history and culture as anyone I know, argues this case: that the appropriation of Indian lands was one of the chief sources of American wealth in the first hundred or more years of the Republic (pers. comm.).

knew it, and which were central to his own account. Up and down the Mississippi, these are now cabled more or less permanently to the shore, transmogrified into casinos catering to American "credulity and weakness." Twain would also appreciate the irony of how the descendants of the original "innocent inhabitants," through their participation in flourishing Indian casino operations, are themselves catering to and trading in on the "credulity and weakness" of their dispossessioners.

In this essay I will focus on the kinds of historical ironies, colossal in their way, that Twain contemplated, ironies having to do with contacts between peoples greatly unequal in power and wherewithal: people in the center and on the margins of history.³ This has been a contact attended by the production of very unequal, not to say colossal, accumulations of values on the one hand and appalling deprivation, on the other, in good part as a consequence of that contact. It is a contact that also has been attended by various attempts to alleviate these inequalities, an "alleviation" that will be central to our concerns.

These are all matters productive of ironies well known to anthropologists, whose discipline, perhaps more than any other, has explored the frontiers of these contacts between the possessors and the dispossessed, the "haves" and the "have nots." In particular, I will focus on "the Development Project"—a notable attempt undertaken by nations privileged in power and wherewithal to correct the gross, not to say colossal, inequalities that have developed in world history.

"Making the World Safe for Democracy":

The Development Project, A Short and Sincere History of its Trajectory

Let me preface my account with two bits of evidence for my argument: some ironic verses and an ironic account, both of which have arisen out of the development project. The first is a bit of doggerel, "The Development Set," which appeared in mimeographed form and was widely circulated on bulletin boards of the Agency of International Development in the late 1970s and early 80s. The second is a semifictional account by Leonard Frank of a development project in South Asia.

The Development Set

The Development Set is bright and noble.

Our thoughts are deep and our vision global.

Although we move with the better classes,

Our thoughts are always with the masses.

3. On this contact, see the work of Eric Wolf, particularly his magnum opus with the ironic title (it plays on dispossession), *Europe and the People without History* (1982).

In Holiday Inns in scattered nations
 We damn multinational corporations
 Injustice seems easy to protest
 In such seething hotbeds of social rest.
 We discuss malnutrition over steaks
 And plan hunger talks during coffee breaks, etc.

The Development Game

This Dutch girl [on the Development Team] is a Nuisance. . . . What are they doing sending a young woman to a Moslem country anyway? For her it is an important discovery that the official world does not match the real one. She visits villages and reports back to us at dinner that the irrigation schemes are not working the way the government says they are, or that the veterinary employees are selling drugs they should give away . . . or that money for building primary schools has gone into the pockets of contractors and politicians. . . . We make non-committal replies and try and change the subject. The older Japanese member says nothing and finds an excuse to leave the table early.

You have to make a choice about the world you live in—the real world or the official world. Nowadays I live in the official world. . . . When you discover that the official world does not correspond to the real world, you can either accept the official version or make your own judgement. It's always best to take the government figures. That way you save yourself work and don't tread on toes. We are here, after all, as guests." (Frank 1986)

These subtle and not-so-subtle parodies of a very large investment of time and resources going on, as it is said, in the First World as regards the Third over the last half century, requires some brief contextualization. Americans, at least, will recall those euphoric and confident years after World War II and the unconditional victory by the more-or-less egalitarian democracies allied against the fascist, authoritarian, and racist regimes of the axis. After this victory, the disparity between the rich (mostly white) and the poor (mostly black, brown, and yellow) parts of the world was noted as an embarrassment and an authentic challenge to the recently victorious egalitarian ethic and to the compassionate religious principles of most of the victorious nations. It was a challenge to the authenticity, that is, to the truly representative nature of the newly founded United Nations. After all, fighting for egalitarian values and a World united under their aegis was an earnest commitment that had been important to the war effort.

Thus came into being, in some mix of sincerity and geopolitical self-interest, the Development Project which has forever after and in many affluent nations been one of the major vehicles for conveying commitment to egalitarian values in the world and for the dispersal, with distributive justice in mind, of a modicum of first-world surplus monies, technologies, and "know-how" into

second- and third-world polities and economies. The defeat of fascism made no worldly task seem too great, and the success of the Marshall Plan in Europe—the first (re)Development Project—confirmed that confidence. Entering into a worldwide development project was simply a continuation by other means of the wartime effort to make the world safe for democracy, and, as a prevalent irony would have it (an irony undercutting to the grandeur of the democratic vision) safe for industrial capitalism.

The Disillusions of Development

But, as is well known, and for a host of reasons, half a century later we find a continuing but much less confident Development Project ripe for the whole escalating continuum of expressions belonging to the *trope of indirection*: irony, sarcasm, satire, mockery, ridicule, parody, and caricature, which it has, indeed, received. The inflated hopes of the 1940s, 50s, and early 60s have been deflated by a series of limiting factors, and, while one cannot say that development at the present time is in a pervasively dispirited condition, it is certainly not the inspired, world-encompassing task it was first felt to be. The real world has caught up with it in too many ways, deriding the too simple and too optimistic postwar views of the rich/poor world and its problems and their solutions that energized the Development Project in its first decades.

There are many explanations for this state of affairs, and we may list them: *inertia*, passivity, fatalism, disinterest, often enough the downright contrariness or "sussexness" of "other worlds"; *corruption*, the subversion or malversation of the public development monies into the private hands of local kleptocratic elites and the politically powerful; *reaction formations*, the production of repressive (often brutally so) governments seeking to control or counter the unwanted effect of development on existing and privileging hierarchies of domination-subordination; *subservience*, the alienated loyalty of local elites to international or multinational interests rather than to their own populace; and *counterproductivity*, because of the exponential flourishing of the rich world, in part exploitative of the poor, the increase in relative deprivation as between the "haves" and the "have nots" remains despite some absolute or arithmetic improvement among the poor (i.e., poor economies may be better off than they were fifty years ago in absolute terms, but compared to the progress in well-being of the rich they are relatively poorer). These factors and others have tested what was bound to be a less thoroughgoing, not to say less compassionate, identification of First Worlders (Europeans and Americans, largely) with the distinctly "other" peoples of the poor world, compared to the easier American identifications with European devastation that energized the Marshall Plan. And these factors have produced the ironic indirections in discourse and

expressive culture represented by our evidential texts and which are the focus of our analytic interest here. Terms loaded with sardonic assessment (e.g., "banana republic," "tropical kleptocracy," "devspeak," and "devthink") have been coined in the crucible of that development frustration, and novels from *The Quiet American* on down, and novelists from E. M. Forster to Saul Bellow, have found that contact zone between the developed and the undeveloped rich in ironic insight into the contrary dynamics of human character in the cross-cultural milieus of colonialism and postcolonialism, that is, "the developing and development world!"

The Irony of the Successful Failure (and vice versa) and Other Types of Subversion (and Self-subversion) of "Sincere" Commitment?

"The Development Set" doggerel and "The Development Game," quoted above—both apparently instances of self-mockery—are representative of the ironic or derisory literature that has circulated widely in the last several decades. The verses seem to have appeared first on the bulletin boards and in office memoranda of the Agency of International Development in the late 70s or early 80s, possibly coming from the hand of an A.I.D. officer or employee. The second piece, "The Development Game," was written by an international development professional based in Paris with a decade and a half of development experience at the time of writing. And though Frank states that "none of the people and events described bear any relation to real people or events" (1986: 256), his account of leading a mission to the northwest frontier of Pakistan—of the types of team members involved and their struggle for reality—is tinged with jaded professionalism and mission fatigue, and seems particularly informed, making his disclaimer itself ironic.

Little more need be said about "The Development Set" except to note that, like much recent work in the academy (see, e.g., Escobar 1995), it also treats of the real-world effect of the discourse of development though, perhaps, unlike this recent work, it goes on to undercut and disclaim its constitutive power to create the very object whose life quality conditions it presupposes to be in need of development:

The language of the Development Set
 Stretches the English Alphabet
 We use swell words like "epigenetic,"
 "Micro," "Macro" and "logarithmic."
 It pleases us to be so esoteric—
 It's so intellectually atmospheric
 And though local establishments may be unmoved
 Our vocabularies are much improved.

Clearly what is being ridiculed here is the inflated professional rhetoric laid beside the self-serving quality of development work. It is a point made with pun-gency in the final verse:

Enough with these verses—on with the mission!
 Our work is as broad as the human condition
 Just Pray God the biblical promise is true,
 The poor ye shall always have with you!

The major thrust of "The Development Game," on the other hand, is rather more that of portraying the jaded acceptance, for self-interested purposes to be sure, of official definitions of situation—of playing the official game without regard to emerging realities. It limns what all that acceptance implies for the truncation or perversion of effective, on-the-ground, development. It is really about the closed, or sui generis world of developers' lifeways frequently noted by those critical of the Development Project. Within or alongside worlds of need, there is the irony (and the ironic unreality) of a project world whose greatest pressures very often concern moving monies efficiently and quickly so that unspent funds do not flow over into subsequent fiscal periods.

But since these pieces tend rather more to the caricature pole on the continuum of the trope of critical indirection, it is more illuminating to consider the energizing ironies in recent books by two central figures in the scholarship of development: James Ferguson's ethnography of development in Southern Africa, *The Anti-Politics Machine* (1994), and Albert Hirschman's collected reflections on a life dedicated to development economics, *A Propensity to Self-Subversion* (1995).⁴ Up to a point, these two figures may be read as representing the two main ideological camps in the literature on development: the first is a neo-Marxist, fundamentally antipathetic to development as being part of the problem of the capitalist strategy of domination of markets and creation of inequality, and not part of the solution; the second is a liberal academic, critical but fundamentally supportive of the development project as a force and practical tool for beneficial change in an unjust world. But it would be unfair to the awareness and experience of either thinker to so easily and ideologically type their work.

Of course, both of our prefatory quotes illustrate a widespread propensity to "self-subversion" in the development enterprise, but Hirschman's ironies,

4. This essay was completed before the publication of James C. Scott's important work on The Development Project: *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (1998). Scott's preeminence in subaltern studies in relation to development would make him an excellent subject for the kind of discussion directed here toward the work of Ferguson and Hirschman. Not only does he combine, like Hirschman, a commitment to the Development Project in general terms with a wary, even skeptical, awareness of its particular failings, but his argument about "everyday resistance" summed up in the oxymoron "weapons of the weak" has been subject to ironic critique as a form of complicity; cf. Gutmann 1993.

summed up in the very title of his collected reflections, are much gentler and, while skeptical, hardly mocking or satirical of the development enterprise itself—to the formulation of which he has over the many decades patiently, and in the face of many frustrations, made a major contribution. It was he, after all, who pointed out most clearly the painful political irony of the development project: that the first several decades of development in the third world had been accompanied by the appearance of many harshly repressive political regimes mainly stimulated to repressiveness by the development project itself. The notion of redistributive justice built into the agenda of the project in effect inspired much reaction, overt and covert, on the part of local hierarchies, aimed at subverting that agenda. It was to these repressive regimes that the development industry was, in Hirschman's view, all too accommodating.

And not only in this political way, but also in the more strictly economic workings of development, Hirschman has long recognized the ever-present possibility and ironic outcome for an effort aimed at greater economic equality; of, in fact, the developing of increasing income inequality as a consequence of development.⁵ But Hirschman has maintained throughout enough confidence that significant advances were taking place through the work of development and that while the problem of world poverty was and is far from resolved that work has made enough encouraging inroads upon it all along the way so as to continue to recommend support of it in principle if not always in specific fact. Thus, while certain ironies were present in his thinking on development, they never exceeded themselves or became so satiric or mocking of economic development as to suggest simple self-servingness in anyone who would continue to support it or to lead to utter denunciation or denial of it. His self-subversion, while cultivating skepticism toward too easy or acquiescent claims for development,⁶ never passes to subversiveness of the development effort itself. He consistently maintains "a bias for hope."⁷ It is a sympathetic bias with shadings of self-inclusive irony however, and with a certain sense of finding oneself in the middle, betwixt and between bitterly contending camps.⁸

5. Albert O. Hirschman, "The Rise and Decline of Development Economics," chapter 1 in *Essays in Trespassing: Economics to Politics and Beyond* (1981).

6. Hirschman says, "I do admit to having frequently a reaction, perhaps something approaching a reflex, to other people's theories, of the 'it ain't necessarily so' variety. Skepticism toward other people's claims to spectacular theoretical discoveries is, of course, not a particularly noteworthy trait. It is, however, more unusual to develop this sort of reaction to one's own generalizations or theoretical constructs. And this has become increasingly the characteristic of my writings that I wish to look at here" (1995: 87).

7. Hirschman made this the title of an earlier collection of essays (1971).

8. Development economics, as Hirschman (1981) points out, has been attacked with the intent of nullification from two sides—by Marxists and neo-Marxists on the one side, and from neoclassical quantitative noninstitutional mono-economics on the other: "The strange alliance of neo-marxism and mono-economics against development economics" (sec. 4, 14–19).

In the same way that the combination of economic and social and cultural reasoning and the betwixtness of his positioning would make it difficult to typologize Hirschman, so Ferguson's espousal, in respect to the Development Project, of the deeply skeptical social critique of Foucault makes it difficult to place him unreservedly in the neo-Marxist camp. There is a complex of ironies involved in Foucault's work, as in Ferguson's,⁹ all more-or-less present in Foucault's 1979 study (highly influential in *The Anti-Politics Machine*) of the institution of the prison. Over the last several centuries this institution seems a persistent failure which yet, in its way, succeeds. It is the irony of the "successful failure" one might say. For just as the institution of the prison has mostly failed in its stated goal of redeeming miscreants and returning them redeemed to society, it has "succeeded," although not in an obvious and "intentional" way, in creating a class of miscreants and delinquents more easily managed by bureaucrats in the "service" of a more "efficient" and more privileging society, and more easily put out of mind as a social issue by society itself. It is this "surprising and ironic process"¹⁰ by which structures of power are inadvertently created and reproduced in the interests of a particular group that both Foucault, in respect to the prison, and Ferguson in respect to development (more particularly the World Bank), analyze. It is the irony of structural reproduction. For although development has so frequently failed in the third world to fulfill the "quality of life" goals of greater local productivity and distributive justice, less poverty and hunger, it has succeeded in reproducing, if not bringing into being, an "infestation," as Ferguson calls it, of ever more controlling, often enough repressive and self-serving, bureaucratic structures. It is this counterintentionality, this contradictoriness of structural reproduction, that is so very ripe for irony.

There are many other attendant ironies in this intellectual project: the irony of the fallacy of equivocation,¹¹ the irony of the incompatibility of the development of capitalism with a thoroughgoing redistribution and the across-the-board improvement of quality of life, the irony of self-serving generalization, the irony of unconscious selection of the elements of definition or

9. I concentrate attention here on the irony of agrarian development projects in Lesotho that Ferguson exposes and explores in *The Anti-Politics Machine*. But his more recent work (e.g., 1993: 78–92) is also, in different ways, grist for any mill that wishes to grind out the ironies involved in the Western Development Project. Ferguson's *Anthropology and Its Evil Twin: Development in the Constitution of a Discipline* (1997) is particularly relevant to the problem of complicity.

10. Ferguson (1994: 13). The quote is taken from Ferguson's discussion of Paul Willis's *Learning to Labor: How Working Class Kids get Working Class Jobs* (1981), and is one of the few places—perhaps the only place—that the word "irony" appears in the text. This, however, does not make his trenchant critique any less pertinent to someone interested in the ironies of the development project!

11. Which is to say, the irony of changing the meaning of the terms of reference in the process of syllogistic argumentation (Ferguson 1994: 55).

representation of situation, and, above all, the irony of instrumental effects to which Ferguson's book is devoted and which is contained in its very title, *The Anti-Politics Machine*. This is the irony of a project, the Development Project, ostensibly and explicitly apolitical, having as a consequence significant political results in terms of the reproduction, indeed development, of a political apparatus: local self-serving bureaucracies determined to restrain, control, or suppress political protest about pervasive poverty. The ironic effect in a project aimed at the amelioration of world poverty is the depoliticization of that very poverty, making it the more difficult to deal with it in any explicit contestatory way.

Of course, there is also the "Foucauldian" irony, as we might call it, of an analysis so revelatory of the counterproductivity and subversiveness of human intentionality in the world, of the inevitable subversive relation of power to knowledge, as to itself be incapacitated to offer any tactical advice, or any relatively straightforward uncomplicated knowledge, on how to deal with the pervasive poverty, hunger, and sickness in the world. There is always the possibility of an undertone of irrelevance, in the practical, real-world-manipulating sense, of what has been intellectually grasped by the analyses of structural reproduction.¹² And it is the presence of this subversive possibility of irrelevance and its complicitous implications to which we may now turn. For the irrelevance of any action or declaration is always possibly ironic in implication, and irony is always possibly complicitous with the situation it ironizes.

"Radical Asymmetry" and Other Sources of a "Culture of Irony" in Anthropology

In recent decades there have been several notable contributions to the detection of irony in anthropology and as a particular condition of the discipline. Indeed the thrust of these arguments would make out something very akin to a "culture of irony" in anthropology. The first is that of Clifford Geertz in his late 60s paper, "Thinking as a Moral Act" (1968), which interestingly, perhaps ironically in view of our focus here, has only recently been included in Geertz' subsequent collections of essays and articles. The second is that of Marilyn Strathern (1990), in her Frazier lecture on "persuasive fictions of anthropology" which reflects upon the irony implicit in the postmodern view of a social science like anthropology resting its case, not on observable facts and verifiable

12. Ferguson in his "Epilogue: What is to be Done" does endeavor to offer counsel and a bill of particulars on the responsibilities of intellectuals interested in greater equality in the world and less suffering — interested, that is, in "popular empowerment." But he ends on a Foucaultian note, remarking the possible irrelevance of intellectual inquiry to the movers and shakers who can bring about significant changes in that world!

generalizations, but on "persuasive fictions." And the third is that of Arnold Krupat (1990), who is not an anthropologist, so that his observations on ironies in our discipline partake a bit of dramatic (or perhaps literary) irony; that is, there is a contrast between what we characters in the drama of anthropology conceive our situation to be, or to have been, and what astute members of the audience, Krupat among them, know it to be, and about which Krupat can conspire with other literary persons to portray it ironically to be. So we have here three formulations of the ironies of our anthropological fate: two that view from within and one from without.

The Geertz work is of particular relevance to our topic because he argues that *anthropological irony* is not quite like the classical ironies, dramatic, literary, Socratic, or historical, in that it involves a crucial difference, a "radical asymmetry," between the situation and privileges and quality of life of the anthropologist as fieldworker and the situation of those he or she studies. It is the kind of pervasive difference in the contemporary world, as we have noted above, that has energized the development project. Says Geertz,

It is this radical asymmetry in view of what the informant's (and beyond him his country's) life chances really are, especially when it is combined with an agreement on what they should be, which colors the field-work situation with that very special moral tone I think of as ironic. (1968: 149)

We may feel the need to remark here that the anthropological irony which arises from "radical asymmetry" is perhaps more particularly the irony of fieldwork after World War II, undertaken either during the period of decolonization or in the period of the postcolonial world of rising expectations in the contemporary third world and of frustrated, if not dashed, expectations of rapid development and accession to first-world status. As I have indicated, it has been increasingly a world of "relative deprivation," where the sense of straightforward and unalloyed commitment in fieldwork is more difficult to maintain and live by than was the case in the colonial world. The asymmetries of the colonial period were indeed radical, but there was usually a paternalistic confidence and assumption that there was, despite the obvious exploitation, a fundamental benevolence in colonialism, a "civilizing mission," as it was called, that would eventually bring enlightenment and well-being, if not at the levels of the metropolitan powers, at least at a long remove from the perceived backwardness of the colonial peoples.

Also during much of the colonial period many colonized peoples were still living in relatively integrated, inward-looking cultures that shielded them from the angering or vitiating knowledge of their "relative deprivation." In any event, the irony portrayed would seem to be more the characteristic irony of that period in which the predominant narrative (Bruner 1986) was that of, if not full assimilation to civilization, at least of expected rapid modernization. The

ironies, or what Beidelman (1986) has called the “pathetic tensions” of a subsequent anthropology, including contemporary anthropology? involve a deeper deception and more bitter unrequitement. And they have produced more poignant and penetrating challenges, such as that of Ferguson, to the confident base-narrative of the Development Project.

Perhaps this anthropological irony, which is a complex combination of abashment—the persistent unmitigated juxtaposition of the advantaged and the disadvantaged—with the sense of relative helplessness to influence the world system so as to be able to do anything very effective about it (to level the global playing field, as it were) which Geertz portrays, has always, at least implicitly, existed. It has existed, one might suppose, as an inevitable “condition of being” when anthropologists from more affluent and more powerful societies work among people deprived in one way or another. This is especially the case when, influenced by a core set of benevolent and ameliorating (civilizing) Western values, such fieldworkers come to feel themselves accountable to, or at least interdependent with (if not actively involved in), seeking the benefit of the less privileged and dependent peoples they study—and, of course, upon whom they themselves, in their career performance, ultimately depend.

Arnold Krupat (1990) departs, not from the radical asymmetry of most twentieth-century fieldwork and the “pathetic tension” it produces in the anthropologist, but from the radical “epistemological crisis” of the late nineteenth century—“the shift away from apparently absolute certainties . . . in religion, linguistics, mathematics, physics and so on—in the direction of relativity.” This epistemological shift was bound to effect Franz Boas, American anthropology’s “founding father,” as it would any other European intellectual. Combined with psychoanalysis, another of the late-nineteenth-century wounds to intellectual narcissism, the resulting atmosphere of intellectual uncertainty was compounded in a trained physicist like Boas by a significantly relativizing career shift—from physics first to geography, less quantitative but surely still more measurable than the contingencies of inquiry bound up in his final shift to an anthropological method based on interpersonal dialogue. As I read Krupat’s argument, the shift to a career based on the much greater contingency of interpersonal cross-cultural relations could only produce in a former physicist ironic attitudes toward the possibility of scientific certainty in his new and final profession.

Taking account of Boas’s well-known resistance to generalizations, Krupat detects in Boas at least the irony of aporia, that is, endemic doubt about the possibility of generalization. But, perhaps, one might even detect in Boas the irony of catachresis (*abusio*) or mischievous undermining of any pervasive certainty to the point of impeding the effective engagement of self and others in fulfilling real-world projects of any kind. At moments, and perhaps mainly, Krupat

argues, Boas’s attitude seemed aporitic, expressing a robust doubt about the validity and verifiability of then-current generalizations in the discipline, but with the intention of preparing the way for a more securely-grounded science of anthropology. At times, however, his attitudes toward the meaning of his own work and that of his students seemed catachrestic in that his sense of the contradictions of the discipline led him to set impossible conditions for a science of anthropology, resting his case and his contribution on his famous five-foot shelf of detailed but starkly undertheorized native ethnography: an “immense celebratory record of randomness,” as Krupat puts it in hyperbole, as if Boas’s career spun around like a roulette wheel.

While Krupat would locate irony of various kinds in the epistemological crisis present in Europe at the time of anthropology’s origins and continuing henceforth in the prevailing uncertainty of modernism and only partial understandings of postmodernism, Marilyn Strathern (1990) places her concern in the irony—no doubt congruent with epistemological crisis—that is contained in the postmodern view, the view that, in the final analysis, cultures, including the culture of anthropology, are and depend upon “persuasive fictions” for their legitimizing real-world effects.

In fact, this view of the narrative framing of cultural and intellectual realities is already implied in the epistemological crisis of the late nineteenth century. It is perhaps true to say that the very active awareness of this narrative framing involved in the work of culture and of the ethnographic work of the anthropologist contrasts the postmodernist present with the subliminal or, at best, half-realized awareness of such as Darwin, Frazer, or Boas—a half-realized awareness which literary critics like Krupat feel confident in teasing out of ambiguous texts as explanatory of Boasian resistances to full scientific generalization and full reductionist scientific commitment. In any event, it is in that awareness—most often a strong self-awareness of the inescapability of narrative framing of ethnographic and ethnologic argument and interpretation/presentation—that, in Strathern’s view, our present ironic condition is expressed and realized.

For our present purposes however, it is important to remark that Strathern saves her argument from the ultimate instability and uncertainty of endless narrative reframings; saves it, that is, from the infinite regress, de-legitimizing, in effect, that can lurk in the recognition of the conditions of irony.¹³ She saves herself, in other words, from that oceanic possibility of endless undercutting, the condition that all is irony and irony about irony, by pointing, in the end, to the fact that the human condition is characterized by *human relationships* that

13. Indeed, the de-legitimizing effect is the critique of Strathern’s lecture advanced by Jarvie (1990: 124), who asks, “If we discover that social science argument is persuasive fiction, who is to believe in it?”

do, indeed, function for better or for worse, to greater pain or greater pleasure, and about whose better or worse functioning anthropologists do have something relevant to say. It is to the study of those relationships wherein lies, although Strathern might not quite put it this way, our enduring obligations as anthropologists. "We shall not be able to return to a pre-fictionalized consciousness," she observes to end her essay, "but we might be persuaded that there are still significant relationships to be studied" (1990: 122). And, indeed, although the word "significant" remains undefined, she and her colleagues and students have been persistent in their commitment to studying them.

Conclusion: Complicitous Irony and the Possibilities of a "Higher Irony"

I should like to end on that note of finding stability of commitment in what has been called our contemporary "culture of irony."¹⁴ This must, I suppose, mean the maintaining of, or the finding of, some kind of commitment that, while given the epistemological crises and awareness of paradox of the times, is itself inevitably susceptible to ironic assessment, yet not derailed by it (aporetic) nor complicit with it (catechrestic). The idea of stable irony is suggested in Wayne Booth's *The Rhetoric of Irony*, though the definition here offered is somewhat different.¹⁵ I would like to define this stability, in the context of the discussion of development, as the kind of irony that is stabilized by resting finally, however buffeted, on an overriding commitment to the age-old task of alleviating poverty, sickness, and hunger in the world.

It may be contrasted with what we might call the "irony of complicity"—something that we can identify in our two satirical quotations. Both pieces, as we recall, suggest complicity with the condition of the development work they satirize. While they satirize the self-serving indulgences and the self-evidently willful "definitions of situation" of development work, they yet choose to remain, for all we know, unaffectedly engaged and complaisant with these

14. Noted in many places recently, but most particularly for my argument in Andrew Del Banco, *The Death of Satan: How Americans Have Lost the Sense of Evil* (1995). While this culture is more broadly defined by Del Banco than the "culture of irony" to be found in anthropology, anthropological relativism is still implicated in the more general culture of irony. For subsequent, more recent observations on this "culture," see Purdy 1999.

15. Cf. Wayne C. Booth, *A Rhetoric of Irony* (1974), chapter 1, "The Ways of Stable Irony," and, in respect to unstable irony, part 3, "Instabilities." As I understand Booth, "stable irony" is irony whose meaning is more-or-less easily (or at least systematically) interpretable. That is, we know that the author *intends* to mean the opposite or something different from what he or she says, and, knowing that, we are thus invited to interpret what he or she is saying *covertly*. Once made, this interpretation is not endlessly undermined with further "demolitions and reconstructions" (10–13). This is to say that our interpretation of the covert meaning of an ironic utterance does not lead on

conditions. "On with the Mission!" the doggerel concludes. These are, or at least can be read as, complicitous satires.

This irony of complicity (or complaisance), with the contradictions identified in its undercuttings, may be contrasted with the ironies present in the work of Hirschman and Ferguson, both of whom, in the presence of the ironies noted, yet use these ironies as motivating instruments for a more perfected development task *vis-à-vis*, in their different ways, the encouragement of popular empowerment and the alleviation of the pervasive poverty, disease, and hunger in the world. They are ironies, one might say, that arise from those situated *within* the world as a moral community of mutual obligation. They are the ironies of those in some way constrained by that obligation and not somehow *with-out* it and independent of it. They are, in short, ironies in action, and not ironies complacent or complicit with inaction. They call upon us to work toward better times.

Since irony is always a form of dissimulation—a feigning or dissembling, an indirection, in speech or other communication—complicity or complaisance in or with the situation being ironized can all too easily obfuscate what is centrally motivating in the dissembling, and the directionlessness to be found out in the ironic indirection. No doubt here we are putting our finger into a great wound in the human condition, the ever-present difference between the *plattitudes* of human life and human relationships and persistent underlying social *attitudes* toward the place of self and others in the social order. And in the space opened up by the recognition of this difference, complicity can all too easily work its way in: complicity, that is, in league with the ironic fact that our best conscious intentions (plattitudes of a kind) are subverted by "the way things actually work out," because "the way things actually work out" is, whatever the plattitudes, still congruent with our deeper lying attitudes and interests.

to mock all our commitments and knowledge, leaving us in an endlessly ironic universe where we cannot really know or commit to anything. The argument put forth in this chapter, correspondingly, assumes that we do know something for sure: that there are unacceptable ("colossal" in Mark Twain's view) differences in quality of life in the world, and we should do something about these differences between the West and the Rest. Furthermore, it assumes that we should not allow justified ironies about how we are or are not going about doing that from disarming us in that commitment and that task, which is ultimately the Development Project. In the best sense, as Booth points out, irony is a communal achievement—a sharing of some insight or truth about the universe and the human condition that can constitute a bond of friendship or of mutual comprehension by kindred spirits: a mutuality of engagement, if only that engagement be something of the kind of "Alas what fools we mortals be!"

Evoking this "higher irony" is very much what this chapter is about and it has very much to do, therefore, with the building of the stable moral community founded in inclusive understandings. Needless to say, perhaps, the engagement with the development project implies active engagement in the world and not just passive observation upon it.

In the Development Project discussed here, this would be complicity with the fact that many development programs do not significantly alleviate poverty, sickness, and hunger but do, in fact, strengthen the control of local bureaucratic elites and international political economic structures in the lives of the impoverished, the sick, and the hungry. . . . elites and controls which, in point of fact and on the ground, espouse our complacent attitudes and serve our status-quo interests. Inclusive irony, I would argue, is motivated irony aware of the impediments in self and other of contradiction and inconsistency and yet so conditioned by their presence as not to be defeated in the mutuality of its commitment to better times.

The problem of complicity, it may be mentioned and not simply in passing, has arisen not only in respect to the international development project but also in respect to the ironies of affirmative action in our own society, one of the more generous attempts in America to move toward better times and to alleviate situations of deprivation and historical disadvantage. In this case it has been pointed out that the platitudes of affirmative action, which propose favoring by special enactments and set-asides the advancement of classified ethnic groups, may in fact, and ironically, actually harden the lines of racial separation and confirm underlying attitudinal feelings about the categorized social reality being contested.¹⁶ But that awareness of the ironic aspect of affirmative action can, when the irony is mutual, only humanize such action and not defeat it!

Another way of addressing this issue, therefore, is to contrast two kinds of irony: a gentler *inclusive* irony with a harsher aggressive and *exclusive* irony.¹⁷ We might speak, also, of irony that is "humanizing," which acts to include the folly of otherness in humanness, and irony that is "dehumanizing" in the sense that in its ironizing it addresses, even creates, unreasonable "otherness" and puts at risk the humanness of that other.¹⁸ Phrasing it this way suggests the old

16. See Dominguez 1994 and Skrentny 1996. The latter work is an interesting analysis of the way the platitudes of politics, that is to say the proclamatory politics of racial equality, actually worked to bring about affirmative-action programs in the 1960s, although, when such attitudes were later probed, as many as 80 percent of Americans were attitudinally unfavorable to affirmative action. What is implied is some latent function or hidden agenda in affirmative action more compatible with these underlying attitudes.

17. This distinction can be found in several of my previous papers; see, in particular, "Convivial Attitudes: The Ironic Play of Tropes in an International Kayak Festival in Northern Spain" (1984) and "Emergencias Etnográficas: Tiempos Heroicos, Tiempos Irónicos y la Tarea Etnográfica" (1993). The distinction is, of course, similar to the idea of "self-irony" found in the work of Kenneth Burke and others examined elsewhere in this volume.

18. Relevant here is the recent discussion of "insider humor," a smug form of exclusive irony, as practiced by, among others, talk show hosts like David Letterman and Jay Leno, and by the co-median Jerry Seinfeld. See the review of various discussions of this kind of humor in the *Line Reader* (March–April 1997, 12–13). The *Reader* contrasts this recent cynical and world-weary humor with that of the Marx Brothers, who always included themselves in their variegated mockery of the human condition.

humanistic notion, associated with Erasmus in *The Praise of Folly*, of "the higher irony."¹⁹

This notion has been recently evoked again by Hayden White in writing about Vico, who conceived of the age of irony, such as ours, as a transitory phase in the cyclical course of history preparatory to a return to the sincerity and authenticity of true literal belief and unambiguous commitment . . . the beginning phase of every recurrent historical cycle.²⁰ While such phenomena are well known to anthropologists as revivalism, fundamentalism, moral rearmament, and revitalization movements of all kinds—expressing the desire for or achievement of such returns to sincerity and authenticity²¹—one cannot very easily in the modern world espouse the Vichian idea of the circular course of history—passing through phases of sincere commitment, followed by phases of ironic apprehension of the contradictory and inauthentic in commitment, followed by a revived true commitment—any more than one can easily espouse a contemporary fundamentalism where sincerity and authenticity are unaccompanied by irony. What one *can* espouse, following the ironists we favor here, is the humanist notion of *folly*—in our case, development held up to ironic scrutiny in the various works here considered—*not* as the opposite of reason and the reasonable, but as the very condition of its existence, with which the Development Project must constantly wrestle and out of

19. Erasmus [1509] 1925. This curious "Humanistic" document, full of *Erasmian Irony*, has been repeatedly debated ever since its composition. It seems to have been composed as a response to the gross humor but intense, literal high-mindedness (and single-mindedness) of such reformers as Luther. It is especially relevant to the perspective of this chapter. This is so if only because, like Erasmus, I am struggling with the problem of the relation between virtue and knowledge, and not primarily with the Foucauldian problem of the relation between power and knowledge, which is very much the contemporary agenda. Erasmian irony, I might define as "that state of mind produced by a manifold appreciation of the complex contradictions and paradoxes of the human condition in this life, ignorance of which inevitably produces many follies." The perspective Erasmus seeks is one that encompasses these contradictions and paradoxes and thus contains a "higher truth" and a higher commitment. That perspective is still necessarily an ironic one, because it arises from a sense of contradiction.

Leonard F. Dean (1965: 349) contrasts Erasmian irony with the classical and medieval (Lucretian) "Ship of Fools" type of irony, forever forensic and jesting, which ends up by mocking all human endeavor and pretense in favor of, if anything, the more serious religious engagements aimed at the afterlife. "Erasmian irony," on the other hand, produces a meaning comparable to that derived from a play or from any piece of literature conceived as drama. The irony resides in the simultaneous expression of several points of view, just as a play is composed of speeches by many different characters, and the meaning of the irony and of the play is not that of any point of view or of any one character, but of all of them interacting upon each other. The result is not paralysis or abject relativism, but a larger communal truth and mutual engagement which is greater than that presented by any one of the characters alone. It is larger, that is to say, than any sum of its parts.

20. Vico's historical cycle (*recorso*) is detailed in White 1976: 216.

21. I evoke here Lionel Trilling's well-known essay, *Sincerity and Authenticity* (1972) to a purpose: Trilling's is a classic argument against the transparency of these terms and the ironies, lodged in the complexities of culture, attendant on their transparency, i.e., unreflective use.

which wrestling insight into a greater perfection in its projects in the world is produced.

At the heart of the Higher Irony, then, is this "inclusiveness" or this "mutuality"²² that derives from the humanistic recognition of that inevitable, existential gap between human intention and human effects and which is the product of the pervasiveness of "human inexperience"²³ and of human forgetfulness. These defects are no less present and reproduced over and over again in the Development Project as a constant challenge to its realization in the world. But it is one thing to withdraw from these challenges and simply ironize about them, and quite another to recognize in them a binding commonality that conditions as it humanizes commitment. The difference, to return to the title of this volume, is between inactive irony and irony in action.

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Chapter Four

DIANE LOSCHKE

What Makes the Anthropologist Laugh?: The Abelam, Irony, and Me

Before being invited to write this essay I had given little thought to applying the concept of irony to the Sepik region of Papua New Guinea. I was intrigued by the topic, as it presented a difficult task for translation into a very different region from its own circulation, into the cultural and linguistic arena of the Abelam area of Papua New Guinea.¹ In this chapter I will suggest that in this culture, despite difficulties in translation, irony is a seductive and crucial dimension of language play that turns everyday life into theater. Finally, however, irony has another, less obvious, characteristic. It surrounds its creators in a trap that they have, unwittingly, made for themselves. The topic of Abelam irony has turned out to provide a rich, though somewhat unsettling, vein of insight for me, as self-interrogation in the face of irony became an intrinsic part of the research. In the end this essay is as much about looking at myself looking at, or, to be more precise, looking *for* irony, as it is about Abelam irony itself.

Learning the Language of Irony

I confess a certain ambivalence about irony, but ambivalence seems a natural accompaniment to the subject. Although I myself often use it, irony seems too clever and distant and, in the postmodern world, so much used as to risk being boring, surely a shameful thing for ironists. The more it is used, the more crit-

1. The word "Abelam" designates a population of approximately forty to fifty thousand people living to the north of the middle Sepik region. They speak a number of mutually intelligible dialects. Abelam clans cluster into villages surrounded by gardens which are cultivated by slash and burn horticulture. The main staples of these gardens are many varieties of yams. The Abelam are known throughout the world for their spectacular carving and painting produced in men's cults. There has been quite extensive research and publication about the Abelam. For more information relevant to the topic of this chapter see Forge 1962, 1966, 1967, 1970a, 1970b, 1973, 1979; Hauser-Schaublin 1989, 1994; Loschke 1995, 1996, 1997.