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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 colonialists and postcolonials, 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;"

If pleasures 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