

# *Cultures of Consultancy*<sup>1</sup>

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*Abstract* ■ Short-term development consultants are employed in the development industry ostensibly because of the pragmatic impacts their work on development is thought to have. Yet in practice, their work is judged more by aesthetic than pragmatic criteria. This article argues that these aesthetic criteria are based on a particular vision of modernity and that this also informs the ‘culture of consultancy’, a culture which sees itself as the epitome of rationality. It is also suggested that this is nothing new, today’s development workers being heirs to the missionaries and colonial civil servants of the past.

*Keywords* ■ consultants ■ development ■ culture ■ modernity

This article is concerned with what short-term development consultants do. The main argument of the article is that although their work is supposed to have pragmatic results – the implementation of ‘better’ projects; the improvement of existing projects; the alleviation of poverty or whatever – in practice the pragmatic impact of their work is in many ways irrelevant. How these consultants actually work, what they produce and the way their work is judged is much more a matter of aesthetics. This is not to say that consultancy work does not have an impact but rather that this impact should be seen in cultural rather than in narrowly defined ‘developmental’ terms, and that the developmental impact may not be quite what was planned.

The article is based on two main sources. First, over the last ten years or so I have worked as a short-term consultant for both official and non-official development agencies on a variety of projects and at various stages in the project cycle, as well as on more general development issues.<sup>2</sup> My role as a consultant has been to advise on the social aspects of development and thus there is a certain bias in the sorts of consultants I am talking about here. Most of the projects I have been involved in have been concerned with the ‘Natural Resources’ sector and because of the nature of consultancy teams I have only rarely worked with other social development consultants. Second, between 1993 and 1995 I carried out research into the development industry in Sri Lanka. This was primarily concerned with the ways in which ‘knowledge’ is generated by the aid business, and the relations between expatriate aid personnel and Sri Lankans.

The argument I am advancing in this article has to be seen in terms of a broader interest in what might be called the ‘anthropology of development’, and to make my position clear it is worth saying a bit more about

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how I envisage such an activity. Increasingly, anthropologists have become major players in the development industry. A full discussion of why this has taken place would require another article. Cynics might point to the 'failure' of other disciplines in the development world and wonder what will be anthropology's successor. Less cynical observers might point to the shifting definitions of development, the growing awareness of the role of cultural and social factors, and the increasing stress on issues such as gender, human rights and equity. In the Department for International Development (DFID) – the official British aid agency – the number of 'Social Development Advisers' (mostly anthropologists) increased from two in 1988 to 38 in 1997, and now (1999) is between 50 and 60. In the same period, the number of short-term social development consultants employed by DFID has increased proportionately. DFID is by no means unique and similar processes are at work in other agencies both multilateral (e.g. the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank) and bilateral (e.g. the official Swedish, Dutch and Canadian aid agencies). A result of this has been an increasing academic interest in 'development anthropology', and the proliferation of courses catering for this growing market. 'Development anthropology' seeks to carve out for anthropologists a role in the development business and centres around the question of 'How can anthropology assist development?' or 'What is the role of the anthropologist in development?'.

Such activities are of course perfectly legitimate, but there is another approach that the anthropologist can adopt. This is to stand outside the development world and instead of asking what might be the contribution of anthropology to development, ask the more traditional question of the anthropologist which is, 'What on earth is going on here?'<sup>3</sup> Most development agencies are based in the West and are only the most recent manifestation of a long history of Western involvement in and attempts to change the nature of other parts of the world. Here, the obvious parallels are with Christian missions and colonial civil services. A century ago, and still today in some contexts, anthropologists could and did play a role in assisting missionaries to convert the heathen. Most contemporary anthropologists would view such activities with suspicion and treat the activities and impact of the missionaries as a subject for analysis, not an activity to enter into as a proponent. Thus, not surprisingly, there continues to be a certain suspicion amongst 'academic' anthropologists of their more practically orientated colleagues (Ferguson, 1997).

Simply to equate the contemporary development industry with the missionaries or colonial civil servants of the last century is of course illegitimate, yet there are some remarkable continuities and parallels. A striking characteristic of development personnel is how frequently they are the children of colonial civil servants, military personnel, missionaries and so on. One cliché common amongst development workers is that while the offspring of the colonial civil service work for official bilateral and multilateral

donors, the children of missionaries join NGOs. Missionary organizations of the past have frequently transformed themselves into today's development organizations, while at the official level bilateral agencies often have their institutional origins in colonial civil services.<sup>4</sup>

These continuities obviously suggest that understanding the development business in general and the activities of short-term consultants in particular has to involve placing them within the context of the broad historical process of the relationship between the 'West' and the 'rest'. Over the last few years there has been increasing interest in the ways that the most obvious aspect of that relationship, colonialism, was not simply a matter of mundane economic and political forces but also involved the generation of specific forms of knowledge about the colonial world. Building in part on the theoretical work of Said and Foucault, the relationship and interpenetration of knowledge and power has become a key issue, a series of authors showing how the epistemological categories of the imperial powers were not only used to understand the world of the 'rest' but also became means of shaping that world. Examples abound, but two of the best are Mitchell's work on Egypt (Mitchell, 1988) and Cohn's on British India (Cohn, 1996).

A similar argument can be mounted concerning the world of development. Various authors (e.g. Escobar, 1984, 1995; Ferguson, 1990; Crush, 1995) have argued that an understanding of that world requires an understanding of 'discourses of development' in which the way we know and construct the developing world is a prerequisite for acting upon that world. And just as the forms of knowledge generated under colonial regimes were intricately associated with asymmetries of power, so too are the forms of knowledge which constitute discourses of development. One of the problems in much of this literature is that it presents the development world as a unified homogeneous entity, sharing a common discourse and a common ideology. Yet just as writers such as Thomas (1994) have pointed out how there was no one colonial discourse, so too with the development industry.<sup>5</sup> Here there is no chorus of harmony but rather a cacophony of different views and positions. And although in this article I have to gloss over many of the complications of the situation in order to produce a somewhat synthetic picture of the world in which short-term consultants work, the complex nature of the development world has to be recognized.

Literally thousands of organizations are involved in the development business, and although there are no reliable figures, it is probable that there are more expatriates employed by development agencies in Africa today than there were at any point in the colonial period. Aid personnel are employed by a host of organizations. The most commonly made distinction is between the 'official' and the 'unofficial' agencies. The former includes multilateral agencies such as the development banks and the family of UN organizations as well as the bilateral aid agencies associated with particular

states, for instance Britain's DFID, Canada's CIDA, Norway's NORAD. Unofficial agencies consist of a vast range of NGOs ranging in size from major transnational agencies to minuscule and at times ephemeral organizations. Finally, there are various private companies who in one way or another are involved in the development business. But such varied organizations should not be seen as autonomous and unrelated entities. The complex paths of funding, of cooperation and of career trajectories link them together in various ways.<sup>6</sup>

One of the striking features of the aid industry is the relatively small number of people who are employed on permanent contracts. Besides a small core of permanent employees, usually concerned with policy and administrative matters, the vast bulk of employees are employed on fixed-term contracts. Such contracts can last for two, three or four years and such staff are employed in a vast range of positions. Project implementation is largely carried out by these people but many are also involved in administration and management. The focus of this article, however, is on the work of short-term consultants employed for anything between a week and two or three months. Again, to distinguish between 'long-term' and 'short-term' consultants is in many ways an artificial divide. Short-term consultants may become long-term consultants and vice versa; some consultants become permanent employees of the development agencies while permanent employees may in turn become short-term consultants. Employment in the world of development is highly fluid.

Short-term consultants are involved in a whole range of activities within development organizations, anything from assisting in formulating policy or producing sectoral reviews to planning, monitoring or evaluating particular projects. The list is potentially endless, but what characterizes their activities is that they are hired to produce a particular output that feeds into some larger whole. Their work supposedly assists the aid agencies in delivering development. The assumption that underlies the employment of short-term consultants is that their efforts will produce a positive developmental impact.

## **Modernism and development**

Usually, but not always, short-term consultants work in teams, the composition of the team depending on the character of the task in hand. Given the importance of economics in the development industry, a point I will return to later, almost all teams include an economist but otherwise all sorts of specialists – foresters, fishing experts, health specialists, engineers, accountants and of course anthropologists – are employed depending on the particular perceived needs. Again usually, but not always, these teams consist of individuals brought together for one particular consultancy. Relatively rarely do the same people work together on a series of consultancies,

and even more rarely is the same person or group of consultants employed at a number of different points in the same project cycle.

Consultancy teams are formed in a number of ways. At times consultancies are contracted out to specialist companies: at other times aid agencies directly employ 'singleton' consultants and manage the consultancy team directly. The consultants themselves come from a vast range of backgrounds. Some are in a sense 'professional short-term consultants' who make a living out of such contracts around the world. Others are employees of consulting companies, retired development personnel or academics on secondment or moonlighting. The result is frequently a very disparate collection of people differentiated in terms of nationality, experience, motivation and background. But for a period of a few weeks members of a team work together in an extremely intensive way and then the group disbands. This has led at least one employer of consultants to liken them to bands of hunters and gatherers who similarly come together for specific purposes and then disband.

Given the transient nature of the consultancy team, given their multidisciplinary and often multinational backgrounds, it is somewhat surprising to me that such consultancy teams can actually function: that they do not collapse into personalized feuding. Of course there are occasions when this does happen. Individuals in a team may be found wanting and may be forced to drop out of a team, but this is rare. As far as consultants themselves are concerned, the ability of teams to persist and to perform is, if it is mentioned at all, seen as a matter of members' 'professionalism'. Precisely what this is remains vague but both consultants and their employers allude to such features as an ability to cooperate with others, technical competence, a recognition of disciplinary boundaries and complementarities, and an ability to work to deadlines – which explains in part a certain bias against academics as consultants. Such qualities are learnt 'on the job' through what amounts to an apprenticeship system, and as far as I know there are no formal training systems for development consultants. Those who are 'unprofessional' are simply not employed on future consultancies.<sup>7</sup>

Yet at another level, what makes consultancy teams possible is not just the degree of professionalism amongst their members but something more basic which runs through the whole of the development industry. In general, consultants are highly committed to what they are doing, although this commitment is often masked with cynicism. Admittedly, they are in the consultancy business to earn a living, and the fees a good consultant can charge may seem high. But money is by no means their only interest and in general consultants are committed to 'development' although there are many arguments as to what development might be. Underlying these differences, however, is what I think can be best described as a self-conscious 'culture of modernity': a formal commitment to a particular view of reality and a faith in 'rationality'. By this I do not mean that every short-term consultant always subscribes at a personal level to this way of viewing the

world, but rather that it forms a more or less consciously adhered to ideology.

What I mean by this 'culture of modernity' is perhaps best illustrated through looking briefly at the ways in which development agencies define the work of their consultants. At the most minimal level, consultants work to a set of Terms of Reference which determine what a consultancy team should do and what the role of the individual members of that team are. Terms of reference typically spell out a series of empirically defined issues and call for action-orientated responses. There are also various 'checklists' which list the sorts of questions and the sorts of information which should be addressed in particular situations. But perhaps the most comprehensive, and for my purposes the best examples of the ways in which agencies define what is and what is not 'relevant' are some World Bank documents which in effect outline not just the structure of reports but the chapter and even section headings of those reports. Thus the World Bank guidelines on involuntary resettlement spell out a report structure with eleven chapter headings and guidance on what these chapters should contain. The guidelines for environmental appraisals are relatively less constructive (or constrictive): they only have eight chapter headings.<sup>8</sup>

What is striking about these documents is that they become both templates for knowing the world and also epitomize a particular view of the world. They are characterized by a set of assumptions about the nature of the world which are more or less shared by all those who work in development. The first of these is the assumption that there is an objectively knowable world which is understandable through the application of rational thought. Put more strongly, this world is not just knowable but knowable in positivist, empiricist terms. Thus there is no room for interpretation because this world consists of empirically verifiable facts (e.g. how many people are 'poor'; what are the salient ethnic identities; what is the gender division of labour). Terms which others might find problematic or questionable such as the 'household' or the 'family' or the 'nation' are all reified into objectified categories. This is most clearly seen in the World Bank guidelines mentioned above where universal categories are laid down within which the world can be neatly arranged. It is manifest also in ways in which the development industry in general, and consultants in particular, favour quantifiable data: to count it is to know – and to control. And it underlies the work of consultants who may have no experience of the country they are in but do possess a particular set of technical skills which are assumed to be universally valid.

Linked to this assumption of rationality and objectivity is a second assumption: that the elements in this objective world are systematically related to one another. The task of the consultant is to identify, through the exercise of rational thought and investigation, these systematic linkages. Thus the basic questions which are asked are 'why' or 'how' questions based on the principle of cause and effect. Furthermore, because the world out

there is assumed to consist of systematically related elements, it is possible to predict what happens when something is changed, and thus planned interventions with predesignated results are possible. What the development industry claims to be doing, and what consultants claim to be helping them to do, is to try to change the existing world in certain identifiable, predetermined ways.

Such a way of thinking about the world clearly has its roots in Enlightenment thought with its stress on humanity's ability to understand and control the world. By adhering, at least publicly, to such a set of tenets it is possible for consultants to work as teams and to share a common world view which both crosscuts disciplinary boundaries and recognizes the autonomy of separate disciplines, for after all these disciplinary boundaries are coterminous with the empirical categories of the real world. Not surprisingly, the dominant discipline in this world is economics, for it embodies in perhaps the purest way the rationalistic assumptions of this modernist world view and in effect determines how specialists from other disciplines carry out their roles.<sup>9</sup>

### **Cultures in consultancies**

What I have been trying to outline so far is a 'culture of consultancy' which is premised on what are seen as modernist principles of objectivity and rationality. The assumption on which development consultancy work is based is that consultants can somehow penetrate to the 'truth', the essence of what is going on in the world they are seeking to change, and that they can do this with the analytical tools which their 'modernity' puts at their disposal. Furthermore, what they aim to do is to change the world so that it more closely approximates the world which is imagined in terms of their modernism. Thus, to use a rather obvious example, neoclassical economics provides the basis for the analyses carried out by consultants. Yet at the same time the model of the future to which the work of consultants is supposed to lead is a world in which peoples' actions and decisions more closely approximate the theoretical forms which are used to analyse the world at present. The analytical tools which consultants use are also normative goals.

Yet, perhaps like most cultures, this culture of consultancy presents itself as somehow opposed to and qualitatively different from 'culture'. What it does is to oppose rational objectivity – what consultants have – to irrational (or a-rational) non-objective culture – which is what almost everyone else has. The very specific cultural history of modernism – its roots in the Reformation; its particular role in Western history; its links with particular political groups and movements; its association with certain ways of organizing the economy – are all denied through a repeated appeal to 'objectivity'. What is being claimed is a discovery of the true nature of the

universe – including the social – and rationality as a mode of thinking is synonymous with rationality as a quality of what is being thought about, no matter how hidden by or in a cultural fog. Thus ‘culture’ for short-term development consultants becomes something that others have (rather like having a disease) and we do not. In various ways culture becomes associated with the irrational and the task of the consultant in particular, and the development industry in general, is to dispel such irrationality. This cultural irrationality can take various forms. For instance it may be economic – not following the logic of market principles; it can be technical – following what appear to be irrational agricultural practices or whatever; it may be social – the seclusion of women or their exclusion from education.

One way in which this attitude is made manifest is the way in which consultants and agencies tend to conceive of culture as a ‘barrier to’ or ‘constraint on’ development. Thus the role of consultants in, for instance, designing a project, is to seek ways in which these barriers can be overcome or circumvented. Similarly, in accounting for the failure of projects cultural factors are frequently invoked. The sorry history of aquaculture in Africa provides one case where such arguments have been rife. The seeming success of aquaculture in Southeast Asia has made it a model which various agencies have tried to introduce in Africa. Despite its technical feasibility and the theoretically beneficial economic returns that would derive from fish farming in Africa, attempts at establishing it in sub-Saharan Africa have generally failed. Generations of consultants have argued that this is due to cultural factors which override the obvious rational benefits of fish farming. Yet as Elizabeth Harrison has shown, cultural factors are not the barrier to development which they are assumed to be. In reality, Western concepts of ‘development’ are themselves cultural artifacts and the ways in which people use, modify and manipulate development interventions have to be understood in a positive light. The apparent ‘failure’ of aquaculture in sub-Saharan Africa is only a failure within a specific cultural definition of development.<sup>10</sup>

Such a position is closely linked to a second which sees culture, or rather cultures, as doomed to disappear. Here, culture is seen as something that disguises or limits the realization of the true essence of humanity. As development takes place; as global homogeneity takes over from heterogeneity so cultures will wither and rationality (as made manifest in the goals of consultants’ activities) will become the universal form of thought and understanding. Such a vision, associated on the one hand with older forms of ‘modernization’ theory and on the other with suggestions that history has come to an end, clearly places the consultant at the end point of progress. Because they embody so clearly the acultural values of modernity they also embody the future which they are endeavouring to assist the rest of the world to attain.

Increasingly, however, the more simplistic forms of modernization theory have been discarded and there has been an increasing recognition



of the implications of culture institutionalized in the workings of development agencies and thus in the activities of consultants. (Hence the nineteenfold increase in the numbers of social development advisers in DFID over nine years.) Yet even where in theory the 'modernist' project is rejected, in practice the same modernist assumptions can be found. Let me briefly present two examples.

One notable shift in recent development thinking and practice has been an increased interest in 'indigenous knowledge'.<sup>11</sup> Ostensibly this has grown out of a rejection of or at least an unease with the effects of 'modern' technology and advocates a concentration on 'local knowledge': the knowledge of farmers rather than of expatriate experts. It is argued that much 'expert' or 'international' knowledge is at best irrelevant and at worst harmful, and that development practitioners should build upon local forms of knowledge. Yet what in practice tends to happen is that there is a winnowing of the wheat from the chaff. On the one hand there is 'indigenous' knowledge which is recognized as 'knowledge' (by the experts) and which is accepted as valid and beneficial (i.e. that it can be understood in terms of its instrumental benefits). On the other are forms of indigenous knowledge which cannot be understood in these terms; which appear to have no instrumental rationale and which are therefore consigned to the dustbin of 'culture' or even 'superstition' (and perhaps more frequently are simply excluded from consultants' reports). In other words, indigenous knowledge is only recognized as knowledge when it fits the models of modernity. Modernism is reintroduced through the back door.

A second example of this failure to escape from the modernist paradigm is the present fashion for 'Participatory Rural Appraisal' in particular and 'participatory' approaches to development in general.<sup>12</sup> These approaches developed in reaction to problems identified in 'top-down' projects designed and implemented from above and are closely related to the stress on indigenous knowledge discussed above.

PRA is somewhat difficult to define in any concise way, but essentially it is based on the idea of 'reversals' of what its proponents claim to be normal development practice. Thus it stresses the knowledge and abilities of local people and the necessity that they should be the ones who define what are their developmental goals and needs. For my present purposes, the important claim made by its proponents for PRA is that it is an acultural technique and that it owes nothing to any specific cultural tradition. Yet when one looks at the techniques which are actually employed: the use of maps, of matrices, calendars and diagrams, it is clear that the framework of PRA is firmly rooted in a specific cultural tradition. Furthermore, the whole objective of PRA – the empowering of 'local people' through access to and mobilization of knowledge – is once again firmly within the Enlightenment tradition. More generally, participatory approaches to development encourage the adoption of specific organizational forms and a very specific conception of the person modelled on that dominant in the

Western world. In the end, what PRA practitioners appear to be doing is to empower people to be citizens of the modern state.<sup>13</sup>

In sum then, the ways in which consultants approach culture are determined by the particular rationale of their own culture which in many ways is the epitome of the modern. Even the self-styled critics of the dominant development paradigms – the proponents of PRA and indigenous knowledge – are themselves firmly within that paradigm.

These various ways of dealing with ‘culture’ are of course highly reminiscent of the colonial world and its rulers. Then as now ‘culture’ was something that ‘they’ had while the colonial rulers possessed rationality and modernity. Then as now ‘local culture’ was only respected when it could be brought into the ambit of understanding by the colonial powers. Admittedly, as far as I know there were no short-term ‘colonial consultants’, but the work of ‘experts’ in the production of this knowledge parallels the work of development consultants who similarly claim and have claimed for them an ‘expert’ status. And just as the understandings produced by 19th-century experts have to be understood in terms of the particular context in which they worked, so the work of contemporary consultants has to be understood in the context of the late 20th century.

Yet even if the context has changed, just as there is a continuity of personnel from the colonial period to the present, so too there is a continuity of ideas. Much of contemporary development thought, especially as it refers to rural society or broader cultural matters, has its roots in ‘orientalist’ thought. One example is the remarkable persistence of the ‘village community’ in perceptions of South Asian society. Invented in the 19th century by such writers as Maine, Baden Powell and Phear, the idea of the ‘village community’ is still for many consultants the basic means of understanding rural south Asia. Thus, to take just one example, many forestry projects have been designed on the basis that there are social entities called ‘villages’ which are homogeneous cohesive wholes, free internally of conflict and of divisions based on power distinctions or property ownership. The work of contemporary historians, sociologists, anthropologists and political scientists is ignored in a picture of the world which juxtaposes ‘them’ and ‘us’, the past and the present, tradition and modernity, culture and rationality.

### **Consultancy as cultural performance**

Short-term development consultants are constrained by a very specific cultural tradition which has its roots in Enlightenment thought and is characterized by a self-conscious ‘rational objectivity’: a culture of modernity. This shared culture is what makes short-term development consultancy possible: short-term consultancy is one manifestation of this particular culture. One cannot imagine such activities in the pre-modern world for instance, and the idea of ‘postmodern’ consultancies is a contradiction in terms. Like the rest

of the development industry short-term development consultants attempt to present their culture as objective and acultural even to the extent of remodelling 'other cultures' to fit the categories of their own. Thus, while it is misleading to characterize development agencies or individual consultants as agents of imperialism or neocolonialism, there is a sense in which there is an imperialism of thought, particular cultural models and categories being imposed upon and often accepted in the developing world.

Within this modernist paradigm, short-term consultancies exist to deal with specific issues. The overall impact of development interventions is increased because of these specialist inputs. The sorts of knowledge generated by development consultants are assumed to increase the ability of agencies to help the poor, break down gender barriers, save tropical forests or whatever. Whether or not this is the case is in a sense beside the point – and within the development business there is widespread cynicism about the worth of short-term consultants.<sup>14</sup> But given the postulates underlying development consultancy it is extremely unlikely that they could impact on the world in the way which is expected of them. The world is simply not the tidy, logically organized place it is conceived to be. Prediction is not possible except at the most general or most banal of levels. Societies are not systems nor do people relate to their environment in a systematic and predictable fashion. In the end, the rationale of short-term consultancy based on the old Radcliffe Brownian idea of a 'natural science of society' surely cannot be defended today.

While at one level the rationale for development consultancies is that they should have a practical impact, at the same time there is an acceptance that they do not and that they are not expected to. While explicitly short-term consultants are hired to deal with specific empirically defined problems, implicitly the situation is rather different. Frequently it appears that they are hired to tell their clients what the clients want to hear, and even more frequently their advice or their findings are ignored. Furthermore, little attempt is made to measure what the impact of consultants' work is. Consultants are not held responsible for the results of their advice (although many have indemnity insurance). As far as I know no consultant has been discontinued because of the results of their advice. When consultants are criticized it is for the 'quality' of their reports. In other words, while the stated position is that reports and recommendations are means to ends, in practice they are ends in themselves. As a particular genre of writing they are subject to a series of aesthetic judgements just as are other genres of writing. And if one wants to complicate it still further they intersect with other genres of writing, for instance internal memoranda and agreed policy documents which are governed by different sets of rules.<sup>15</sup>

So what is a 'good report'? What are the qualities which consultants aim to produce and their employers look for? What are the canons by which consultants' work is judged? The temptation to produce yet another checklist has to be avoided but here are some of the more obvious features:

- *The structure of the report.* Reports begin with an 'executive summary' – the ambiguity of 'executive' being only too clear. What is important here are the recommendations: the path for the future. Paragraphs are numbered or at the least sections are numbered somewhat in the manner of a treatise on car maintenance. Acronyms are given prominence, a signifier of how this particular document fits into the wider world of expert knowledge. A 'good' report may have two or three pages of acronyms.
- *The appeal to objectivity.* Words like 'perhaps', 'some', 'unclear', 'uncertain' and so on are strangely absent in consultancy reports. Rather the picture that is presented is one of certainty. Doubt is not allowed, nor is opinion, and quantitative data is preferred over qualitative information. Linked to this is the absence of the author in consultancy reports. Authorial names may appear on the cover but never in the text, and the passive tense is beloved of successful report writers. What is being written about is distanced and objectified: both authors and readers are firmly excluded from the text.
- *The appeal to rationality.* Development consultants' reports are written in a way which leaves no loose ends. The analyses which are presented are based upon the assumption of systematic closure and indeed impose that closure upon the subject under consideration. The world that appears in these reports is remarkably tidy. Words like 'contradiction', 'disjuncture', 'fault line' and all the other terminology of the contemporary academic scene are notable by their absence.
- *The appeal to legitimacy.* Acronyms present a sense of an official world, and despite the list of formal translations at the beginning of the report acronyms function to 'officialize' the document while decreasing its transparency for those not familiar with the letters. At the end of the report an 'itinerary' or list of people met is attached, 'proof' that the consultants have done their work.<sup>16</sup> Sources cited tend to be other reports, in particular those produced by the standard bearers of the development world: the World Bank in particular and the regional development banks in general. Academic works tend to be ignored. The result is the generation of orthodoxies, 'facts' being recycled over the years, with sources sometimes cited and at other times simply plagiarized.<sup>17</sup>

Other features could no doubt be identified, but the point I wish to stress here is that what these characteristics of a 'good' consultancy report amount to is an exemplification of the values of modernism. And judgements about consultancy reports are based upon an aesthetic which values these qualities. When consultants are criticized it is because their reports in one way or another fail to live up to these aesthetic standards not because their reports fail to reduce 'abject poverty' or whatever. Perhaps the clearest example of this aesthetic at work is to be found in the 'logical frameworks' which almost all official donor agencies (and an increasing number of NGOs – see Wallace, 1997) use as planning tools and which are frequently drawn up by consultants.<sup>18</sup> Ostensibly a tool to assist in the rational planning of projects, these 'logframes' become art forms in themselves. Groups vie with each other to produce the most (I quote) 'elegant' logframes. Judgements are passed on skill, judgement and taste with which activities are related to outputs and 'objective verifiable indicators' are identified. Thus consultancy teams produce an object which is to be admired not because of its utility or its insights but because of its beauty

and its fulfilment of certain aesthetic standards: rationality, objectivity, impersonality, closedness, etc. What consultants do is a cultural activity. Although it is claimed that their work has pragmatic objectives, in practice it is judged in terms of aesthetics, judgement and taste. Consultants are cultural performers, cultural artists, whose product should not be judged in terms of its supposed practical ends.

### **'Development for grown ups'**

The sort of argument I have been trying to formulate in this article is very much based on 'the view from the outside'. Thus rather than worry about how to make consultancy work 'better' or more 'useful' I have tried to identify what consultants do as a particular cultural activity. If I am correct it is as useful to ask 'What does a piece of music do?' in pragmatic terms as it is to ask the same question of a consultancy report. While of course most people in the development business would disagree with the sort of analysis I have been suggesting, there are others who would, at least privately, agree. As one senior development administrator put it to me, 'What we are involved in is development for grown ups.' By this he meant that only 'grown ups' realized that the logic of development agencies and their activities was the production of pieces of paper. On the face of it this points to a cynical view of a world divided into sophisticated adults who know how the real world works, and naïve children (by implication those who work for the NGOs), who believe that what they do has a direct and predictable impact on the world.

Such cynicism is not unusual in the development world and many involved in it do feel that they are involved in a set of activities whose only outputs are further pieces of paper: reports, reviews, memos. Yet such cynicism can also be seen as a form of defence: a way of dealing with the complexities and impossibilities of trying to achieve the mystical goal of development. Earlier, I mentioned the commitment of development consultants to development. Yet at the same time, many are highly cynical about the development industry in general and their activities in particular. They are forced by the modernist vision to produce reports which have only a tangential relationship to the world they are trying to influence, and forced to engage in a seemingly futile production of paper and plans rather than action and deeds. To say that their products are to be judged in aesthetic terms is to acknowledge the limitations of the world of modernity and of a particular form of rationality.

### **Notes**

- 1 Earlier versions of this article were presented at a workshop on consultancy held at the University of Warwick in June 1997 and as a seminar paper to the

Anthropology Department at the London School of Economics. My thanks to all who made comments at these events and also to Heiko Henkel, Elizabeth Harrison, Harriet Stanley and Maia Green. This article is partly based on field research supported by the Economic and Social Research Council. Finally, I must thank all the consultants and development professionals with whom I have worked and relaxed over the years.

- 2 For non-specialists in development, fuller discussions about what is meant by 'official' and 'non-official' donors will be given later in the article.
- 3 For examples of what this 'anthropology of development' might look like, see Crewe and Harrison (1998), Grillo and Stirrat (1997) and Ferguson (1990) amongst others.
- 4 This is of course most obvious in the cases of agencies backed by specific religious groupings, for instance CAFOD (backed by the Catholic Church) and Christian Aid (supported by the Anglican Church). World Vision remains something of a hybrid, seeing itself as both a missionary and a development organization while other organizations such as Oxfam have their roots in religiously motivated philanthropy. Turning to the colonial roots of official aid organizations, DFID grew out of the Overseas Development Administration which in turn developed from and inherited personnel from the colonial civil service.
- 5 See also Harrison (n.d.).
- 6 Thus NGOs are often dependent on funding from official donors and in effect act as consultancy companies (see Fowler, 1992; Hulme and Edwards, 1997; Stirrat and Henkel, 1997). A typical career pattern in the development business involves starting out as a volunteer with an NGO, moving on to being an NGO employee and then transferring to the relatively highly paid world of the official agencies.
- 7 One employer of consultants remarked to me that when looking at CVs he tended to dismiss potential candidates who had rarely been rehired by the same organization, the argument being that their work must have been unsatisfactory otherwise they would have been re-employed.
- 8 These guidelines are to be found in the World Bank Operational Manual.
- 9 On the nature of economics as embodying a specific cultural heritage, see Gudeman (1986, 1992), Gudeman and Rivera (1990) and Stirrat (1999). On the role of economics and the 'sacerdotal' aspects of economists, see Markoff and Montecinos (1993).
- 10 On the role of 'culture' in thoughts about aquaculture in sub-Saharan Africa, see Crewe and Harrison (1998).
- 11 The literature on 'indigenous knowledge' is vast and growing exponentially. Recent examples include Warren, Slikkerveer and Brokensha (1995) and Sillitoe (1998).
- 12 As with indigenous knowledge the literature on participation in general and PRA in particular is vast.
- 13 This is of necessity a very truncated discussion of an extremely complex topic. For a fuller analysis see Henkel and Stirrat (forthcoming).
- 14 This cynicism is summed up by the frequently mentioned definition of a consultant as someone who borrows your watch to tell you the time.
- 15 See the work of critics such as Roe (1991).
- 16 How often such lists or itineraries are read is a moot point. I recently came across a report on a project in Southeast Asia which included the itinerary for another consultancy in Africa!
- 17 Thus in one case I came across in Somalia, the origin of an authoritative

estimate of the number of fishermen in the country could be traced back through a series of reports (each of which allowed for a small percentage increase in line with purported population growth) to an original very rough estimate. By dint of repetition through a series of authoritative reports what had started as an admitted rough estimate had become an authoritative judgement. (Hand-held scanners are going to make this process much easier.)

- 18 For the non-development specialist, logframes are four by four matrices which are used to plan projects. The left-hand column, the so-called 'narrative summary', displays the logical relationships between activities (or inputs), outputs, purpose and objective, the terms varying from agency to agency and over time. The centre two columns are concerned with 'indicators of achievement', how the narrative can be monitored. The right-hand column deals with the assumptions and risks which relate the various categories in the narrative column. For a full discussion of the theory of logframes, see Mac Arthur (1993).

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