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The Will to Improve: Governmentality, Development, and the Practice of Politics

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BOOK REVIEWS

The Will to Improve: Governmentality, Development, and the Practice of Politics

TANIA MURRAY LI

DUKE UNIVERSITY PRESS,

DURHAM, NC, 2007

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REVIEWED BY MABEL SABOGAL

The Will to Improve is a rich description of governmental practices effected by national and international institutions and directed at systematic *improvements* for marginal populations. This ethnography details the way development strategies are deployed; in particular, Li analyzes the interactions between the different actors—villagers, development organizations and non-governmental organizations, government officials and institutions—that take place in the development encounter, as exemplified by cases from the Central Sulawesi region of Indonesia.

The book is divided into seven chapters. The first describes the history of Indonesia for the last 200 years—in the context of development interventions—until the end of the Suharto regime in 1998. The subsequent five chapters present various programs that were formulated to improve the lives of villagers in Sulawesi from the beginning of colonial rule through the first years of the twentieth century: their general objectives, contradictions, consequences and their ultimate failures. Throughout her book, Li explains how colonial and neo-colonial regimes (but also national, regional and local elites) have viewed less powerful people as deficient, backward, and in need for improvement. In addition, indigenous subsistence practices have been seen as destructive of the environment and not productive enough, thus requiring correction. The institutions in charge of development were interested in improving populations, improving the landscape, and improving productivity; in the process, people were subjected to forced resettlement, excluded from their land, and drawn into intensified agricultural production (p. 61).

In her analysis, Li critiques and extends the works of Ferguson (1994) and Escobar (1995), and she uses Foucault (1991) to define the purpose of government and sovereignty, to theorize the limits of government, and to understand social control and power inequalities. Gramsci's ideas (Crehan, 2002) are the basis for Li's description of the ways people mobilize for change and protest; and Marx (1887) constitutes another important source because of his presentation of analytical tools to study the material conditions of human existence.

Li's illustration of contemporary development discourses and practices in Central Sulawesi centers on the social tension resulting from the creation of the Lore Lindu National Park in 1982 (final boundaries were established in 1993). Indigenous peoples were pushed from their traditional lands and gardens and relocated to less fertile ones outside of the park. The development agencies charged with helping people recover (while still supporting the goals of conservation in the park) analyzed the situation in preliminary historical, economic and social studies. However, when the time came to plan and implement the designed projects, they disregarded the information previously acquired about problems such as "growing landlessness," "high indebtedness among the indigenous population," "vulnerability... to displacement," among others (p. 126). Their excuses were that these problems identified were not merely technical, were too complex and could not be solved by them. Thus, they never accomplished their goal of significantly improving people's lives.

Li argues that by tackling only technical problems—by defining specific and localized issues and dissecting them (p. 123)—the development organizations did not recognize the structural conditions that created the troubles in the first place. Furthermore, whenever interventions failed, and problems became worse, there was always a need for more interventions (p. 122). The institutions and people responsible for the development programs did not initially examine their own practices as potentially responsible for the further marginalization of people; instead, villagers were blamed for their inability to improve their own conditions and were then subjected to social engineering to modify their behavior and make them comply

with the mandate of the government and development/conservation institutions.

After repeated failures, development organizations eventually tried to implement different programs and improve their own performance, but these efforts obtained the same results. The Nature Conservancy, for example, in the 1990s failed to achieve its goals of raising conservation awareness and increasing economic gain through sustainable practices (p. 140), because such goals and the concepts used to define them did not match those of the local people who were primarily concerned with their right to cultivable land (p. 139). Later, The Nature Conservancy attempted a new strategy framed within the concepts of community and partnership, supposedly paying attention to what the villagers had to say (p. 193). They did not succeed however, even though villagers proved adept in the conservation discourse.

Allied either with villagers or with the pro-park alliances, other non-governmental organizations also exerted pressure and added more components to the problem of access to land in Sulawesi. Wahana Lingkungan Hidup Indonesia (Friends of the Earth Indonesia) and Yayasan Tanah Merdeka (Free Land Foundation) critiqued foreign donors and officials' plans, and these two organizations helped villagers claim sovereignty over some expropriated lands (p. 148). Eventually, after three demonstrations by villagers demanding a solution to their land tenure and access problems, the organizations helped the group self-identified as the Free Farmers Forum take over the Dongi-Dongi valley inside the park (p. 153). Nevertheless, after reclaiming the land, more conflicts ensued between the farmers inside the park and other indigenous groups claiming ownership over the same land, as well as between pro-park and pro-farmer alliances (p. 168).

This book constitutes an important reference for those involved in the fields of applied, engaged or public anthropology and, in particular, for individuals working for development organizations or in public and international policy. Li promotes a reflection on academic and professional exercises of delivering abstract notions of improvement and appropriate ways of life to others (in less powerful positions), which rarely correspond to people's realities, heterogeneity, needs and wants. Although Li

explains the ways in which improvement organizations have themselves attempted to improve, the fundamental causes of problems of marginalized populations continue to be unaddressed.

In addition, the author appears to provide concrete examples for James Scott's (1985) argument that peasants are not necessarily interested in revolutions, or total structural change. Instead, peasants negotiate their right to a modest or decent way of life (with work, land and income) as established in their relationship with the dominant group through an implicit social contract that tacitly mediates and expresses the needs of both social groups. Thus, revolutions, for Scott, appear more as conjunctural events that respond to an orthodox, middle-class intention of transformation supported dialectically by the angry peasantry subjected to unacceptable measures of injustice. Many of the peasants described by Li saw the need to protect the environment, but they also wanted to make a profit and did not mind giving the government its own share in the form of taxes (p. 227). They were not anti-government; they simply wanted to participate in and be recognized as valuable assets to their country (p. 280).

Li disagrees with Escobar's implicit premise that, in development, there is conspiracy (p. 286). The shortcoming in this position and Li's analysis is the lack of treatment of crucial questions that arise from her own conclusions: Who has the power to make the structural changes needed in order to improve people's lives? And, what would be the consequences for development organizations, governments and major financial institutions in allowing such change? The failure of institutions to deliver their promises, to address the real problems, and to pay attention to (or not ignore) the facts may speak of a predetermined and tacit agenda that is aligned with the main goal of capitalist logic—to expand the market—which contrasts with the needs of villagers. In addition, institutions providing funds for development are often banks, with very specific objectives of economic growth.

Li makes some interesting observations in the last chapter. She examines, for example, a World Bank project called Kekamatan Development Program in which alternatives that encourage competition, tough

surveillance, and control practices are proposed for villagers to acquire resources and fulfill their goals, in self-designed, and self-regulated, projects, funded by the Bank. It is an attempt to study the mechanisms of local social capital, but it is also an attempt to insert people in the market economy, and make them behave in accordance to the capitalist standards of competition, accumulation and progress. Even though Kekamatan Development Program was considered (and replicated) as successful by the World Bank, it also failed to address the real issues in people's lives—although it did succeed in modifying their conduct towards market and accumulation activities.

In conclusion, it is evident in Li's account that historical attempts to improve people's lives in Sulawesi while reconciling conservation, capitalism and social justice is impossible for two reasons: the lack of attention to political economic structures, and the absence of villagers' participation in decision-making. At the same time, in many cases populations resist and eventually reclaim what has been extracted from them. The will of some to improve the lives of others does not cease, however. Li poses an important question: If there is evidence of populations' abilities to resist and claim spaces of justice on their own—especially since partnership, participation and collaboration are today recognized as crucial in development—why are there still trustees interested in assisting them to improve? Trusteeship, and the "hierarchy that separates trustees from the people whose capacities need to be enhanced," (p. 278) are "embedded in the will to improve" (p. 281). In this sense, it would be worth the effort to further explore Li's thesis.

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The Rongelap Report: Consequential Damages of Nuclear War

BARBARA ROSE JOHNSTON AND HOLLY BARKER
LEFT COAST PRESS,
WALNUT CREEK, CA, 2008
321 Pp. \$29.95 PAPERBACK

REVIEWED BY LAUREN HARRIS

Through attempts to dig up truths about a society destroyed by nuclear fallout, this ethnography chronicles one of the most devastating chapters in American history. In 1954, 67 nuclear bombs were tested in the Marshall Islands by the United States military. Despite warnings about the possible effects of this testing on the local inhabitants, the bombing