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Rural Development: Putting the Last First

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CHAPTER TWO

Two cultures of outsiders

'Do you know what he's talking about?'
'I haven't the least idea.'

Conversation recounted by C. P. Snow in *The Two Cultures and the Scientific Revolution*

Outsiders polarise into two cultures: a negative academic culture, mainly of social scientists, engaged in unhurried analysis and criticism; and a more positive culture of practitioners, engaged in time-bounded action. Each culture takes a poor view of the other and the gap between them is often wide. The two cultures partly coincide with two clusters of explanation of rural poverty: 'political economists', mainly social scientists and academics, explain it primarily in terms of social relations; while 'physical ecologists', mainly natural scientists and practitioners, explain it primarily in terms of physical and biological factors. A balanced view may best be sought in a pluralism which straddles both academic and practitioner cultures, which accepts both social and physical explanations, and which is open to the third culture, of rural people in a particular place.

Outsiders not only observe, or fail to observe, rural poverty; some also analyse it, and some try to act on it. To assess the analysis and action, we need to look more closely at the background, conditioning, values and experience of those who analyse and those who act. Separating out and describing groups of outsiders is bound to do violence to the subtleties and overlaps of reality; nevertheless, trying to be brief and clear, I shall in this chapter describe two contrasting cultures of outsiders, and two clusters of interpretation of rural poverty. I shall argue that each culture and each cluster is incomplete, giving only a partial view, and that through pluralism – a synthesis of the two cultures and of the two clusters – analysis will come closer to the truth and actions can be identified which will be better suited to needs.

Two cultures

It was in Britain, over 20 years ago, that C. P. Snow popularised the idea of two cultures, one of scientists and one of literary intellectuals. Though himself at home in both, he constantly felt that he was moving among two groups – 'comparable in intelligence, identical in race, not grossly different in social origin, earning about the same incomes, who had almost ceased to communicate at all' (Snow, 1959, p. 2). They had a curious distorted image of each other; and there was between them a gulf of mutual incomprehension, even hostility and dislike,

Similar gulfs are found among those concerned with rural development in the Third World, but who are outsiders, being themselves neither rural nor poor. Gulfs of incomprehension, even hostility and dislike, exist between disciplines, professions and departments, and between headquarters and the field. They are also experienced between foreigners, with their distinct life styles, access and resources, and nationals with theirs. But these obvious and well-known problems distract attention from a less clear-cut but more general and enduring cleavage. This is the divide among rural development outsiders between those who analyse and those who act, between academics and practitioners. At one pole we have academic social scientists preoccupied with the 'What?' and 'why?' of development and underdevelopment, with political economy, especially who gets what, why and how, and with the processes which they see as determining the answers; and at the other pole, we have practical administrators and technical scientists who concern themselves with the 'how?' of development, with trying to change things, and with trying to get things done. The physical, linguistic and experiential distance between these two groups, each with its own culture and mores, is wide; and often there is little sympathy or communication between them. To hear a seminar in a university about modes of production in the morning, and then attend a meeting in a government office about agricultural extension in the afternoon, leaves a schizoid feeling; one might not know that both referred to the same small farmers, and might doubt whether either discussion had anything to contribute to the other.

The depth of the division is reflected in the way extremists in each culture view the other. To some critical and intolerant academics, practitioners are narrow-minded philistines and at best naive reformists, part of a system of exploitation of which they are largely unaware, while technical scientists, for their part, serve their own class, producing technologies which are not for the poor. Administrators and scientists rarely ask the key

question – who gains, and who loses? – and if they do, their answers are unlikely to make much difference to the poor. In any case, in the view of some critical academics, historical forces determine patterns of change, and one can do little more than watch and analyse as inevitable processes work themselves out. The rich, powerful and urban classes will prevail, at least for a time, and administrators and scientists are their willing, if often unconscious, tools.

To some narrowly practical administrators and scientists, academic social scientists appear to indulge in esoteric and incestuous debate, muttering to one another in private languages. These academics do not understand the constraints of the real world. They criticise but do nothing constructive. Given their incompetence, this is as well; and whenever they do get involved in programmes and projects, they only make trouble. They are incapable of writing anything short or clear, or of meeting deadlines. They question priorities instead of getting on with the job. They look for things going wrong; they write about failures not successes. It is best that they stay quarantined in their ivory towers and do nothing worse than mislead the young. Rural development is hard enough without them around to make it harder.

More moderate and sympathetic views can regard the actors in each culture as conditioned by their training, environment and work, and can see how these pull them apart and make it difficult for them to meet and communicate. In this spirit, let us examine each culture in turn.

Negative academics

Academics are trained to criticise and are rewarded for it. Social scientists in particular are taught to argue and to find fault. University staff spend much of their time assessing essays, seminar presentations, and examination papers. Their mental set is evaluative. When it comes to rural development, they look for faults. Their peers, too, award them higher marks for a study which points to the bad effects of a project than one which highlights benefits. Some social scientists have, in any case, an anti-government ideology and set out from the start to muck-rake. A supposedly successful project is a red rag to some academics, a challenge to see whether it can be turned into a failure by finding hidden harmful efforts or errors which officials try to conceal.

These critical attitudes have made an enormous contribution to the understanding of rural development. Looking back over the

past three decades, we can see that without such attitudes it would have taken much longer for the development professions to recognise the deficiencies of the 'trickle-down' approach, the tendencies for local elites to capture the benefits of 'development', the misery of many poorer people, and the plight of so many women. These are just some of the general insights which have led to better planning, design and implementation in rural development.

Negative interpretations can, however, mislead. They may be the result of selective perception, recording and writing, of choice of research topic, and of delays in analysis and publication. Social scientists often prefer, and can most easily get funding for, research on programmes or projects which are new. Because they are new, they are precisely those where most is going wrong; and the studies occur before the main early lessons have been learnt and corrections made. In East Africa in the 1960s research concentrated on settlement schemes and cooperatives, both new and exciting programmes of rural development to which governments and donor agencies alike attached priority. In India in the late 1960s and early 1970s research concentrated on those few districts where the Intensive Agricultural District Programme was being implemented and the green revolution was either occurring or thought likely to occur (Harriss, 1977, p. 30 ff). The outcomes are well known. Many settlement schemes in Africa were found to be expensive, to create privileged settler groups with dependent attitudes, to disappoint in agricultural production, to be staff-intensive, and to represent a misallocation of resources. For their part, cooperatives were found to be inefficient, to be captured by local elites to the exclusion or exploitation of smaller farmers, poorer people and women, to suffer poor repayment records, to fail to pay their members, and to have a high turnover of both staff and funds which tended to disappear simultaneously. The green revolution in India was less negatively reported, but it was found that increases in production mostly benefited the rich, the landlords, the merchants, and the owners of tractors and tubewells, while the poor and the landless gained less, or did not gain, or lost (UNRISD, 1974; ILO, 1977).

These studies were salutary, but often late. A few were available soon after the research. Usually, though, there were long lags between fieldwork and publication. The popular culprits were foreign researchers working for their Ph.D.s who mined their data in the peripheral Third World and then removed it to a metropolitan core for processing and adding value for themselves, returning the final product to the Third World country only, if at all, much later. But long time lags are not

limited to researchers who are foreign. The problems are more general. Delays in data-processing, analysis, and writing reports, theses and books, mean that research findings come on to the market three, five or even ten years after the original fieldwork. The larger the surveys and the more the disciplines involved, so the longer are the delays. Thus while careful critiques were being prepared of the early problems of settlement schemes, cooperatives, and the green revolution, some of those problems were being tackled. By the time the criticisms were published, they did not always apply with the same force.

One example can illustrate the point. Studies of settlement projects in East Africa in the late 1960s found many faults. This was a time when many of these projects had expatriate managers, when there was a tendency to provide too many services and subsidies for settlers, and when some settlement projects could plausibly be criticised as total institutions (Moris, 1967; Gosselin, 1970; Sokiri, 1972). But many of these defects had, by the mid-1970s, been reduced or eliminated. For example, the settlements in Tanzania for Bahutu refugees from Burundi were far from total institutions, allowing the settlers much freedom of movement and autonomy in decision-making. But when a seminar for staff of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees was organised to consider the relative merits of such 'organised' settlements as these, and what was known as the 'spontaneous integration' of rural refugees (meaning that they had to fend largely or entirely for themselves), social scientists whose views had been formed in the earlier period criticised organised settlement. They did not know that many lessons had been learnt and incorporated in new settlements.

In this instance, as in others, negative social science was out of date. Often, indeed, the rate of rural change is so fast, the coverage of research so low, the traditions, methods, and questions of research so conservative, and the processing of research so slow, that social scientists are permanently behind the times, failing to keep up either with rural conditions or with government practice.

Development studies are, moreover, permeated with gloom and doom. As taught in some universities, they depress. If economics is dismal, development studies are morbid. The study of historical processes itself generates a sense that things could not have been otherwise. When this is backed by an ideological framework of historical inevitability, and combined with preoccupation with what has failed or is bad, pessimism and impotence follow. This leads some political economists to undervalue even their own work (not, be it said, a notorious

characteristic of social scientists generally). Thus Colin Leys, concluding his book *Underdevelopment in Kenya*, wrote that academic studies

...can contribute little to the effort to achieve new strategies of development grounded in the interests of the mass of those who are currently the victims of underdevelopment. Perhaps the most such studies can do is to try not to obscure the structures of exploitation and oppression which underdevelopment produces, and which in turn sustain it.

(1975, p. 275)

Such pessimism understates, for a start, the impact of his own book. Critical analysis is good when it reveals processes in ways which change thinking and practice to benefit the poor. The danger is that it becomes inbred, loses touch with reality and practice, and then degenerates into sectarian narcissism and scholastic squabbles as social scientists speak less and less to anyone but themselves. The development administration movement of the 1960s and the mode of production debates of the 1970s both invite questions: who gained and who lost? The academic analysts? The poor? And did the mass of those who are currently the victims of underdevelopment deserve, and could they have had, something better?

Positive practitioners

Many of those actively engaged in planning, programmes, projects and R and D for rural development are more positive. They are those who work in government departments in headquarters and the field, technical researchers, the staff of voluntary agencies, and personnel of donor organisations. They are responsible for decisions, for acting or not acting, for allocating resources, for choosing what to do or not to do. The archetypal academic is cocooned, isolated from the operational world, disciplined only by the teaching timetable. The typical practitioner, in contrast, is more exposed, and tied to the deadlines of budgets and seasons, to targets, and to political demands. Practitioners have a sense, too, that their actions or non-actions make a difference. So while academics seek problems and criticise, practitioners seek opportunities and act. Academics look for what has gone wrong, practitioners for what might go right. Thus, for example, to contrast with Leys' conclusion, here are the final words of the summary of a book, the principal author

of which was the President of the International Agricultural Development Service:

And, while the food-poverty-population problem is massive and complex and will be extremely difficult and time-consuming to resolve, the existence of new capabilities provides a magnificent opportunity, perhaps a fleeting one, to deal with it effectively – if governments have the wisdom and the will to act.

(Wortman and Cummings, 1978, p. 14)

The sobering qualification of 'if governments have the wisdom and the will to act' is almost an afterthought; the style and thrust are positive and optimistic. It is a far cry from trying not to obscure something bad to seeing a magnificent opportunity to do something good.

The dangers of positive optimism are, however, as great as those of critical pessimism. Four deserve mention.

First, energy and success over-reach themselves. In rural development practice, those who are rewarded and promoted include some who are energetic, enthusiastic and entrepreneurial. These are the sort of people who make things happen – swaying meetings, raising funds, and inspiring loyalty. These very virtues carry with them dangers of deception. Drive and enthusiasm passed down a hierarchy can generate an upwards flow of information which misleads. Vigorous programmes have to achieve their targets, so their targets are reported achieved. So it was with the areas said to be growing High-Yielding Varieties of paddy during the green revolution drives of South Asia: in a district in Tamil Nadu, the area reported was over three times the actual (Chinnappa, 1977, p. 96), and in part of Bangladesh Hugh Brammer reports that it was five times. The manner in which successful projects take off into self-sustaining myth has already been noted (pp. 17–18). And the outstanding and charismatic leader creates his or her own problems of replication. What worked quite well at Comilla under the leadership of Akhtar Ahmed Khan, could not be extended successfully to the rest of Bangladesh, nor indeed sustained fully after his departure. Replicable models are the exception, not the rule.

Second, positive practice is often unable to accept or use discordant information. Many rural development projects and programmes are delicate and unstable, especially in their early stages, and vulnerable to attack by political enemies who search for ammunition. Evaluation is called for but may be regarded by managers as threat not support, while evaluators appear as spies

not allies. When criticism is offered, or damaging information comes to light, there are several possible reactions. The hardest is to accept it and change course; others are to deny it, to try to keep it quiet, to buy off the critics or to coopt them into a public relations role. Morale may then be maintained, and selective perception and myth have their part to play in maintaining support, élan and momentum; but in the long term, the costs in benefits foregone and in eventual disillusion may be high.

Third, the objectives of practitioners are often narrow. There is a recurrent tendency to home in on a single, preferably technical and physical, objective. The most common is to increase food production (regardless of whether poor people can grow the food for themselves or buy it). Others include the physical targets of construction projects, or the output targets of training programmes. Narrow professionalism here combines with practical imperatives, the need to do something and to be seen to have done it, regardless of who gains.

Finally, over-optimistic estimates are made in the early stages of projects and programmes. Partly this is because over-estimates are needed to get proposals accepted in the first place; partly because of the ease with which social cost-benefit analysis can be manipulated to produce whatever internal rate of return is thought necessary to get agreement and funding.¹ This is not an entirely negative point, however. In Albert Hirschman's theory of the Hiding Hand, habitual underestimates of difficulties which will be encountered in implementation are offset by equally habitual underestimates of the creativity which can be mustered to overcome them (Hirschman, 1967). Vision and hope are needed for action. Rural development is so difficult that some self-delusion may help to get things going at all.

Rural poverty explained?

The two cultures have contrasting ideas about the causes of rural poverty. These contrasts are far from absolute, and there are many overlaps and exceptions. Both might agree that past poverty tends to perpetuate itself. But going beyond this, the negative social science pole attracts and sustains those who explain poverty in social, economic and political terms, while the positive practitioner pole attracts and sustains those who explain it in physical and ecological terms. These views tend to cluster rather than to be absolutely separated. So we may talk of a 'political economy cluster' of views, found mostly, but not only, in the academic culture, and of a 'physical ecology cluster' of views,

found mostly, but not only, in the practitioner culture. The political economy cluster sees poverty primarily as a social phenomenon; the physical ecology cluster sees it primarily as a physical phenomenon.

'Political economists', so defined, include most academic social scientists. They are so divided by discipline and by ideology that to lump them together appears, and is, simplistic. But the sharpness of their disagreements hides a premise which most of them share: that poverty is to be understood primarily in terms of economic forces, social relations, property rights, and power. Their stance can be illustrated by C. T. Kurien. In his book *Poverty, Planning and Social Transformation* he views poverty as deprivation, but not only deprivation. It is deprivation for the many and affluence for the few. He regards poverty as

7) *the socio-economic phenomenon whereby the resources available to a society are used to satisfy the wants of the few while the many do not have even their basic needs met. This conceptualization features the point of view that poverty is essentially a social phenomenon and only secondarily a material or physical phenomenon.*

(1978, p. 8. His emphasis)

Physical ecologists, for their part, are mostly practitioners and scientists. Their position can be illustrated from two authors: J. S. Kanwar and Norman Myers. In his Presidential Address to the 12th International Congress of Soil Science, Kanwar said that 'mankind today is faced with many challenges, the biggest being food shortages and environmental degradation, both resulting from the population explosion and poor resource management'. The key to the world food problem and environmental problem was better soil resource management, which was of great urgency for the survival of mankind (Kanwar, 1982). Throughout the address, Kanwar stressed physical factors such as soils, environment and population. Myers, in a brief World Environment Report, *Analysis: why the fight against hunger is failing all across Africa* (n.d.) attributes famine to natural disasters, civil disorder, adverse weather, refugees, bureaucratic problems in food distribution, man's overloading of semi-arid environments, and failure to produce more food. The emphasis is on the physical dimensions of natural and man-made disasters. Neither Kanwar nor Myers considers power, property, social relations or income distribution.

These summaries no doubt do less than justice to the three authors. Kurien goes on to gloss his point; Kanwar was a soils

scientist speaking to soils scientists; and Myers might well argue that in a very short article a comprehensive statement of cause is neither possible nor needed. The fact remains, though, that Kurien on the one hand, and Kanwar and Myers on the other, presented very different views of much the same basic human problems.

Let us now elaborate this contrast more generally, and try to summarise these two clusters of explanation – of political economists like Kurien, and of physical ecologists like Kanwar and Myers.

Political economists

In the political economy cluster, rural poverty is seen as a consequence of processes which concentrate wealth and power. Although within this cluster there are many schools of thought and assertion, their differences are exaggerated by sectarian concepts and jargon and by polemical style so that it is easy to overlook the extent to which they overlap. In general, they agree that the processes which concentrate wealth and power operate at three levels: internationally, the richer countries have made and keep the poorer countries relatively poor through colonial exploitation and post-colonial unequal exchange, and at the same time benefit from the investment of capital and the expatriation of profits; internally, within the poorer countries, urban and especially urban middle class interests gain at the cost of rural interests, through shifts in the rural-urban terms of trade (cheap food for the towns, dear goods for the countryside), and through investment in urban industries and services; and within the rural areas themselves, the local elites – landowners, merchants, moneylenders, and bureaucrats – consolidate their power and wealth. For their part, the rural poor stand to lose relatively and often absolutely through all these processes. Low prices internationally, low prices internally for rural produce, and the ability of the local elite to concentrate wealth in a few hands, especially by buying land and appropriating common resources, combine with low wages to keep the poor poor or to make them poorer.

To political economists, technology and commercialisation play a part in these processes. Capital-intensive technology (combine harvesters, tractors, modern mills, large irrigation pumps, and so on) subsidised through aid, through an overvalued exchange rate, and through direct government support – is 'available to those who already command credit and land. Commercialisation brings with it urban products (bread, shoes,

plastic goods, pots, furniture, iron frames for building, ornaments and so on) which displace rural products. Capital-intensive technology destroys the livelihoods of labourers, and commercialisation those of artisans. Both concentrate wealth in the hands of those already less poor, and enable them to become wealthier, to buy more land, to appropriate more of a larger surplus, and to expand their trade. These processes also weaken traditions of mutual responsibility and sharing, both vertically between patrons and clients, and horizontally between small farmers and between the landless. Social relationships with obligations give way to cash relationships without obligations. The rural-urban links of the wealthy are strengthened and their position is reinforced through alliances with political leaders and with the bureaucracy; poor families are weakened, impoverished and isolated.

In this view, then, the rich and powerful get richer and more powerful; and the poor become relatively and often absolutely poorer and weaker. Exceptions are recognised, such as Korea where rapid growth has benefited almost all, though some much more than others; and Taiwan where a land reform gave unusual equality in landholdings and where growth has also been remarkable. But these are seen as aberrations from the general tendency for change to concentrate power and wealth in the hands of the few at the cost of the many. Attention is directed to South America, South Asia, Indonesia, much of Africa, and elsewhere, where many of the rural poor are believed to have gained little through the changes of the development decades, or to have lost out through these processes.

Physical ecologists

In the physical ecology cluster, rural poverty is interpreted more in terms of what is physical, visible, technical, and statistical commonsense. The two most commonly cited causes of poverty are population growth and pressures on resources and the environment. Populations in developing countries are rising at 2.2 per cent per annum (World Bank, 1981, p. 108) without any prospect of an early sharp decline. In Sub-Saharan Africa the rate is higher, 3.0 per cent, and in Kenya 4.0 per cent (at which rate it doubles in 18 years). While some of this increase is absorbed in migration to towns, it is argued that urban employment and the urban informal sector are becoming saturated. Much of the increase in population will have to be supported in the rural areas. But there, under the pressure of population, land is

becoming scarcer. Small farms are subdivided on inheritance and children are then poorer than their parents were. Labour supply exceeds demand and real wages go down. Some migrate to the towns to swell a miserable urban proletariat. Others move to marginal environments – steep slopes, low rainfall savannahs, and areas prone to flood or drought – where they contrive temporary and precarious livelihoods. Others compete for common resources which they decimate or destroy – fish, grazing, groundwater or forests. Fallows shorten and fertility falls. The creeping desert, soil erosion, floods, siltation, declining primary production, dropping water tables, and lower crop and livestock yields all follow. Uncontrolled population growth and uncontrolled exploitation of natural resources, in this view, combine in a vicious circle: the more people there are, the more they destroy the long-term potential of fragile environments, and the poorer this makes them and their descendants.

Physical ecologists also see the physical characteristics of poor people as explanations of their condition. Parasites, diseases, malnutrition, insanitary conditions, poor housing, lack of amenities – these are proximate causes. Physical weakness interacts with other disadvantages to perpetuate poverty. Acute shortage of food impairs the mental development of the child. Underfed people have stunted bodies. Poor people are locked into a syndrome of physical deprivation.

Poverty is also explained by climate. The correlation between mean monthly temperature and poverty is truly astonishing (Harrison, 1979 a and b²). Almost all the poor countries lie between the northern and southern isotherms of 20°C, and almost all the industrialised countries outside it. In one view (Harrison, 1979b) a critical factor is that up to 20°C humus forms faster than it is broken down, enriching the soil with nutrients and improving its structure; but above 20°C the bacteria work faster than the supply of dead vegetation, making it hard to sustain fertility. Other factors are also postulated in the climatic explanation – heat discouraging physical work, intensity of rainfall, prevalence of pests and diseases, and the seasonal interaction in the tropics of concurrent adverse factors – with food shortage, need to work, and diseases all coming at the same time during the rains (Chambers, Longhurst and Pacey, 1981). Moreover, some natural disasters – floods, droughts, cyclones – and the famines which follow them, are common in the tropics.

Finally, to complete the listing, there is a cluster of factors which both schools can hardly fail to recognise: war, civil disturbance, and persecution. Rural refugees who have crossed international boundaries are among the poorest and most

powerless people in the world. Displaced persons within countries with civil disturbances may be even worse off because of their lack of physical protection. The tragedies, over the past ten years, of millions of rural people displaced by regimes, wars and disturbances in Angola, Zaire, Mozambique, Namibia, Rhodesia (as it was), Guinea-Bissau, Burundi, Ethiopia, Somalia, Uganda, Equatorial Guinea, the Spanish Sahara, Laos, Vietnam, Kampuchea, Burma, Bangladesh, Afghanistan, and elsewhere, speak for themselves.

Partiality

Now it may seem beyond debate that there is truth in all these explanations. But if so, why are so many of them so often left out? In practice, in both academic and practical cultures, among both political economists and physical ecologists, most analyses and prescriptions are partial, concentrating on one or a few explanations and actions and ignoring others. Three reasons can be suggested for this partiality.

The first lies in the ideological rejection by present day research of colonial beliefs. Colonial explanations of rural tropical poverty included race, climate and contingencies. The racist belief was that the natives were inferior, stupid, lazy, improvident and dissolute. The revulsion against this racist belief has been so strong and so universal that climate and contingencies have been thrown out too, tainted by guilt by association. As Gunnar Myrdal has observed:

In the apologetic colonial theory, climate was given an important role as an inhibitor of development but this view has now almost disappeared from the economic literature. I mention this as an extreme example which demonstrates how unsparing was the post-war revolt against the colonial theory. . . . Even the word 'climate' has almost disappeared from the literature, except in occasional brief statements that climate is of no importance to development.

(1979, p. 27)

Similarly, some of the contingencies which make people poorer, such as dowry, sickness, and drunkenness were major preoccupations of earlier analysts like Malcolm Darling (1925). The reader of the 1980s will find some of his interpretations offensive, but this does not mean that all his observations are invalid.³ It is rather that the colonial and racist associations of

climate and contingency explanations have been responsible for their premature and scientifically unwarranted burial.

The same point can be made with soil erosion in Africa. The colonial scare about soil erosion fitted with the view of shifting cultivation as backward, feckless and irresponsible. Some colonial agricultural officers sought to impose order, discipline, straight lines, and control on what they saw as a primitive and chaotic system of cultivation which was destroying its environment. The measures of control which this order was believed to require may have met the psychological needs of the agricultural officers more than the physical needs of the cultivators. In Tanzania and Kenya, authoritarian soil conservation measures were so unpopular that they helped to generate and unite political organisations which then struggled for and won independence. In the post-independence decade it was scarcely then a matter of surprise that soil erosion was a non-subject. It was simply not seen or, if seen, not mentioned; thus demonstrating the astonishing human capacity diplomatically to repress and ignore discordant facts.

A second reason why some explanations are left out is the inbreeding of disciplines and professions. This point is too obvious to labour. Most university education is a narrowing, a focusing of attention and a refining of skills which exclude in order to specialise. Disciplinary academics and practising professionals meet, listen to and argue with those of similar backgrounds. A soils scientist finds his fellows among other soils scientists, or physical or perhaps biological scientists, but scarcely among sociologists; a political scientist meets and discusses with other political scientists, or other social scientists, but scarcely with research agronomists. It is not strange that there should be little overlap in their views of the problems of rural development. All have been conditioned to focus on a few aspects to the implicit exclusion of others; and members of each specialised group reinforce each others' narrow vision.

A third reason is the desire and need to simplify. Positive practitioners can only tackle one or a few factors at a time, and tend then to disregard others. Some academic analysts oversimplify, searching for or grasping at a unifying theory with simple components. More generally, syntax and the limitations of thought and speech force simplification. Writing and speech are linear and sentences (mercifully) finite. Long lists bore. There is a temptation, for the sake of coherence, intelligibility and interest, to attribute causal primacy to one factor or another - colonialism, capitalism, culture, class, greed, technology, population, low productivity, climate, environment. The pressure to shorten and

simplify is especially acute with the media. As Susan George has complained: 'Swelling numbers in the poor world are . . . the media's favourite - in fact sometimes only - way of explaining to readers and viewers the reasons for world hunger' (1976, p. 53). The producer of a half-hour television programme may be constrained to find one clear message that even slow-witted viewers can grasp and find of interest.

If several causes are admitted, discussion becomes more difficult, with questions of weights and primacy. An illustration is the debate over the significance of population growth. The extreme neo-Malthusianism of Paul Ehrlich (1968) is too dated to be taken seriously. But we can contrast the more measured views of Erik Eckholm, of Keith Griffin and Azizur Rahman Khan, and of Rodolfo Stavenhagen. Considering El Salvador, Eckholm acknowledges that unequal land ownership was a major contributor to environmental stress, but states that 'The obvious catalyst of El Salvador's environmental decay in this century has been the dizzying growth in human numbers' (1976, pp. 168, 183). Griffin and Khan writing on poverty and landlessness in rural Asia have a different emphasis:

Given the structure of the economy . . . and the resulting nature of the processes of capital formation and innovation, the faster is the pace of expansion of the population and labour force, the stronger will be the tendency for the standard of living of some groups or classes to fall. . . . It is important to underline, however, that the cause of increasing poverty in Asia is not an alleged population explosion. Rapid population growth is merely a contributing factor. The basic causes are the unequal ownership of land and other productive assets, allocative mechanisms which discriminate in favour of the owners of wealth, and a pattern of capital accumulation and technical innovation which is biased against labour.

(1978, p. 301)

Stavenhagen writes this:

It is . . . a mistake to attribute the depletion and misuse of local resources, as some authors do, exclusively to the demographic pressure on the land. While population growth has undoubtedly played a role in this process, the development of market relationships is surely the main cause of the increasing disequilibrium between population and resources at the local level.

(1977, p. 45)

The words used by these writers - 'obvious catalyst', 'the cause', 'contributory factor', 'the basic cause', 'surely the main cause' - reflect their judgements and attempts to make balanced allocations of weights, in each case avoiding a narrow, uncausal dogmatism. But the words they (and indeed all of us) use imply nuances and raise questions. Is a catalyst a cause? What is the difference between a contributing factor and a basic cause? What makes something a main cause? There is also a further vocabulary - of causes which are necessary or sufficient, of conditions which predispose, of thresholds which are passed, of events which precipitate - which can be used to refine and sharpen discussion.

Partiality matters because narrow analysis and action are liable to be misdirected. Moreover the analysis and the action have forwards and backwards linkages, each reinforcing the other. Political economists who see social causes of poverty may seek to change social and property relations; physical ecologists who see physical causes of poverty may seek programmes of soil conservation, family planning, and resettlement. But the realities which these confront have complex differences - spatial, ecological, social, economic, political and temporal. The best interventions will vary. The truth is that there are many causes of rural poverty; that it is difficult to judge to what extent one or more may be primary; that the balance of their significance varies over time, by season, and by country, region, community, village, household and individual; and that not only causes of poverty but also opportunities for wealth are points of departure for rural development.

Partiality matters all the more if it is ahistorical. Rural society appears to be but is not static. Processes of change are often subtle, elusive, and rapid. Guy Hunter expressed a sense of this when he wrote of his book *Modernizing Peasant Societies*, that

. . . perhaps its central theme is that growth takes place as a long chain of small, related sequences, each of which determines the possibilities for the next. Like flood-water spreading on uneven ground, the runnels of change divide and coalesce again, here are diverted by a hillock, there are checked in a depression, build up, and break out again in new directions. The history of man in society can give some helpful indications of its general course; its detail is a matter of exact and patiently accumulated knowledge of the social topography in each case.

(1969, p. 293)

This is also a warning of diversity and of the limited scope of

generalisation. Any practical theory will be more valid in some places and under some conditions than others. Approaches based on partial preconceptions – whether of political economists, physical ecologists, or any one discipline, profession or school of thought – are likely to miss significant truths and fail to find the best interventions. A balanced pluralist approach, empirically based and with a wide span in both political economy and physical ecology, is more likely to fit the reality and reveal what best to do.

Pluralism

This pluralism is an ideology based on doubt, puzzlement, and agnostic openness to evidence and argument. It seeks enlightenment in both poles of contrary views, in practice seeing error less in what people say than in their condemnation of what others say. It is multidisciplinary by commitment. It requires political economists to ask about material conditions (climate, population, the environment, human physical conditions), and physical ecologists to ask about social relations (wealth, power, patronage, who controls and benefits from what, and who gains and who loses from what); and all to ask repeatedly what should best be done.

Pluralism recognises multiple causation, multiple objectives, and multiple interventions. It is suspicious of uncausal explanation, of the single objective, and of the one solution. It sees, rather, rural development in terms of many dimensions, of complementarities or trade-offs between objectives, of sequences and mixes of interventions. The logic of cost-effectiveness requires it at the same time to seek simple actions. The struggle is to improve blurred approximations to understanding, and fumbling attempts to make things better. This requires exposure to rural reality and openness to new information. It entails allowing observation and unexpected details to qualify and generate theory, rather than for theory to limit what is noticed and considered relevant.

Pluralism in the spirit of this book also embodies a philosophy of reversals: reversing the narrowing of professional vision to broaden it, reversing the direction of teaching and learning to enable core people to learn from those who are peripheral, reversing the flows of information in organisations so that those at the top learn from those below. Reversals such as these are sought, not as absolutes, but to a degree – to offset built-in biases and to achieve a more balanced understanding and better action.

Pluralism in rural development is also a way of life. It demands straddling – between academic analysis and practical experience and between the social questions of political economy and the material questions of physical ecology. This is not easy. Academics who teach gradually distance themselves from the operational world; committed practitioners are drawn away from university life and thought. Within institutes, there is a polarisation between those who lack practical field experience and who teach how dreadful it all is, and those who become involved in consultancy and are seduced by the excitement, responsibility, and flattery of 'the real world'. Those who shift from foot to foot may lose their balance; those who try to stand on both poles risk hernia. Some whose negative analysis whispers to them that the state is not benign find themselves as consultants driven to recommendations which require the benign state as a premise. A pluralist view is that this tension is creative and leads to better analysis and better practice. The tragedy is that so many outsiders are channelled into one exclusive trap or another. It is in the interests of the rural poor that they should be helped to escape: that more practitioners should spend sabbaticals standing back and seeing their work in perspective; and that more academics should be thrown in at the deep end and made to swim.

The difficulty of straddling between the academic and practical cultures varies by discipline, profession and country. Economists and statisticians have been generally successful in moving from one sphere to the other, being at ease either in a university department or in a planning office. Geographers and agricultural economists, both with hitherto rather low academic status, have made many of the best contributions. A growing band of rural development consultants contrive to have their feet in both camps. The United States has a stronger tradition than most countries of university staff being engaged in practical affairs outside the university, and this has been reflected in the involvement of United States universities in third world rural development. More generally, the rewards are often high, intellectually and in impact, of straddling the two cultures. Thus, for example, S. P. F. Senaratne, a social anthropologist, has written that the experience of working with the Sri Lanka Government

is one which I have enjoyed greatly. It has provided me with much stimulus in a setting in which disciplines such as Anthropology are poorly represented and in an academic environment which, for a variety of reasons, cannot provide that stimulus. I would go so far as to say that the Social Sciences cannot thrive in Sri Lanka until those involved

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recognise the present crisis in the intellectual tradition and stimulate this tradition by linking their disciplines to practical affairs.

(1978, pp. 10-11)

The third culture

Finally, pluralism in rural development has a third leg. The two cultures – academic and practical – share the top-down, core periphery, centre-outwards biases of knowledge. Both are therefore in danger of overlooking that other approach to understanding, from the bottom up, from the periphery towards the core, from the remote towards the central. For the two cultures are cultures of urban-based outsiders. The third culture, of the rural people in a particular place, is the true centre of attention and of learning. As some officials were once told, 'The village is the centre; you are peripheral'. The micro-level is again and again out of focus; and when in focus it is seen from a distance, through the urban professional's telescope. To understand rural poverty better, and to judge better what to do, outsiders, of whatever persuasion, have to see things from the other end.

Notes

- 1 For one agricultural project appraised by three different teams, rates of return were estimated as, respectively, 19 per cent, 13 per cent, and minus 2 per cent.
- 2 Harrison is, however, a pluralist, not a physical ecologist.
- 3 See Chapter 5.