Feminism and the Anthropology of 'Development': Dilemmas in Rural Mexico

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**Abstract:** Feminist promotion of gender equity in development began in the 1970s, challenging development policy and practice and producing a rich body of debate and scholarship. Feminist anthropologists, through scholarship and activism, made important contributions to the project of reforming development. A recent anthropological critique of development, however, referred to as the anthropology of 'development', has raised important questions about anthropology's relationship to development, presenting new challenges to feminist anthropologists who would engage with development. This new approach, despite its attention to power, has not had questions about gender at its centre. Drawing on fieldwork in southeastern Campeche, Mexico, this paper explores challenges of a feminist anthropology of 'development', including pressures for engagement and disengagement, and the apparent contradiction between reflexive critiques of, and feminist engagements with, development.

**Keywords:** anthropology of 'development', Calakmul, engaged anthropology, feminist anthropology, gender and development, Mexico

**Anthropology, Feminism, and Development**

**Introduction**

The engagement of feminists in the promotion of gender equity in development policy and practice began in the 1970s. It has transformed development practice and produced a rich body of interdisciplinary scholarship. Anthropologists studying women have been, and continue to be, central to that project, both as promoters of gender equity and critics of development. Development has also been an important theme in anthropological research more generally, although anthropology's relationship to development has been characterized by ambivalence and passed through several distinct phases. Anthropologists, like feminists, have contributed to the elaboration of development theory and challenged development practice. Feminist anthropologists working on development have thus bridged the fields of feminism, development and anthropology.

A recent anthropological critique of development, however, referred to as the anthropology of 'development', has raised new questions about anthropology's relationship to development. Despite its attention to power, however, the emergent critique of 'development' has not engaged adequately with feminist anthropology or feminism more generally. This paper therefore considers the possibilities for feminist perspectives in the anthropology of 'development'. Drawing on fieldwork in rural Mexico, it explores the challenges and contradictions of such a project, including pressures for engagement and disengagement.
The discussion presented here reflects the current moment, when many feel the momentum of feminist activism and research around development assistance has slackened. Although gender equity remains a goal of many organizations and individuals, the means to advance feminist initiatives may not be as evident as they once were. And while almost two decades ago di Leonardo concluded that ‘Feminist-inspired anthropological research and writing on gender relations … has come of age’ (1991: 1), I have seen a jarring disjunction between the centrality of gender issues in debates about ‘development’ in rural Mexico – indeed the vitality with which gender roles and ideologies are lived and contested in everyday life there – and the scepticism within some quarters of anthropology about research that uses an explicitly feminist framework, addresses development issues, and works to communicate its results beyond disciplinary boundaries. Countering this, I argue that conducting feminist anthropological fieldwork on development in a ‘Third World’ setting characterized by hierarchies not only of gender, but also of class, ‘race’ and ethnicity, is a critically important and timely intellectual and political challenge, and that the issues it raises are central to the discipline.

Before presenting issues that arose in my research project and addressing current challenges, I will briefly describe the histories of feminist and anthropological engagements with development, beginning with a clarification about the term itself.

Multiple Meanings of Development

Development, in the sense the term is now used, began after the Second World War. Both the Marshall Plan to rebuild Europe and the post-war planning of colonial empires were models and impetus for the creation of a global project of ‘development’ that drew primarily on economic theory. The absence of development came to be the dominant explanation for material poverty of some regions and countries, leading to the creation of development agencies and assistance programmes.

By the early 1970s, as the limitations of a purely economic view of development became evident and as decolonization proceeded, social scientific disciplines turned their attention to the problems of the new nations. Development theory became an important site of engagement for anthropologists, feminists and political activists. Anthropologists began working as researchers and employees of development agencies, drawing attention to the cultural dimensions of development policies and projects and contributed to theories of socio-economic change. Similarly, feminist scholars, activists and development workers drew attention to the implications of socio-economic change for women and challenged development organizations to make gender equity a priority in all their work. This shift from an economic to a broader understanding of development, however, was not uniform and, as a result, led to a multiplicity of competing understandings of the term.

At present the term is used in two broad ways by scholars: the first, to refer generally to socio-economic change; and the second, to refer to the policies, projects and practices of national governments, international bodies, multilateral or bi-lateral aid agencies and NGOs working towards, well, ‘development’. This paper focuses on this second meaning, while recognizing that even within this field the term’s meanings are multiple and shifting.
Coinciding with the emergence of second-wave feminism in industrial countries, the text helped make ‘foreign aid’ a site for feminist engagement in donor countries (Snyder 2004; Rathgeber 2005). Since the 1970s feminist engagement with development has become a wide, well-developed interdisciplinary field. Multiple actors and actions have formed what some have referred to as a ‘women/gender and development movement’ (Snyder 2004), while others refer to international networks of diversely situated researchers and activists that have participated in struggles for ‘voice, representation, and resources’ within development (Cornwall, Harrison and Whitehead 2007: 2–3). Feminist anthropologists, like other feminist scholars, have aimed to improve women’s lives through the production and dissemination of knowledge, in addition to their contributions to activism, advocacy and development practice. Di Leonardo noted how ‘Feminist anthropologists, especially those working in Latin America, joined with feminist historians and other social scientists to create a massive and contentious field focused on “women and development”’ (1991: 21).

Early efforts to transform development were first framed in terms of what came to be known as women in development (WID) and focused on the integration of women into development. This approach was later criticized for its limited perspective, for not taking into account ‘the totality of women’s lives and work’ (Rathgeber 2005: 580). These concerns were supported by the results of ‘concentrated fieldwork by anthropologists who had compiled detailed profiles of the sexual division of labour … in different rural settings’ (ibid.: 580). Criticisms of WID led to the appearance of gender and development (GAD) approaches. These insisted that development policies and practices be based on a consideration of gender relations, rather than of women alone.

There is, however, ongoing debate about how effective for advancing feminist concerns WID and GAD have been. Cornwall, Harrison and Whitehead argue that although GAD approaches ‘facilitated the dedication of resources, the production of policy spaces, the creation of a cadre of professionals and a body of organizations of various kinds whose work is to deal with issues of gender’ (2007: 5), they reduced ‘the political project of gender and development … to a “technical fix”’ (ibid.: 9).

In the late 1980s Sen and Grown (1987) presented perspectives of southern women, drew attention to the intersections of race, class and nation with gender, and popularized the term empowerment. This work paralleled the recognition by feminist anthropologists that their analyses should more fully account for the ways in which gender intersects with other forms of inequality in shaping women’s lives as well as power imbalances among feminists.

Another field of action, the women’s human rights movement, appeared after the UN General Assembly adopted the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) in 1979. Rights-based approaches have been particularly successful in drawing attention to women as citizens and in claiming public space for women, and have lead to positive legal reforms in some regions (Molyneux 2007: 235). They have also helped to transnationalize women’s movement activism, facilitating links among international, national, regional and local initiatives.

At the World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995 the UN adopted gender mainstreaming as a strategy for promoting gender equality. This involves ‘assessing the implications for women and men of any planned action, including legislation, policies or programmes, in all areas and at all levels’ (Office of the Special Advisor on Gender Issues and Advancement of Women 2002: v). Feminists hoped that this would be an effective impetus for addressing women’s interests into development policy and practice more broadly. But, as in the case of GAD, there is concern that gender mainstreaming lends itself too well to
the technocratic workings of development organizations and not well enough to promoting social change. Current research is examining the ways gender mainstreaming has been taken up by development institutions and its implications for women’s struggles (Phillips 2005 and Glynis George’s paper in this issue).

**Development’s Disengagement from Feminism?**

Although feminism’s contribution to development theory and practice is widely acknowledged, some scholars have questioned the depth of transformation achieved (Snyder 2004; Phillips 2005; Rathgeber 2005; Cornwall, Harrison and Whitehead 2007). Cornwall, Harrison and Whitehead describe how gender has ‘fallen from favour and has a jaded, dated feel to it. Diluted, denatured, depoliticized, [it is] included everywhere as an afterthought’ (2007: 5–6). According to Molyneux, ‘[t]he evidence suggests a significant gap between the gender equality guidelines [of large development institutions] and the practice’ (2007: 228). She argues that the momentum towards feminist goals has slackened in the current political climate and furthermore that ‘The view that gender awareness has become part of the common sense of development policy is now so widespread that some NGOs report a growing ennui, a “gender fatigue” in metropolitan policy arenas with women’s programmes increasingly being seen as passé’ (ibid.: 227). Rathgeber finds there have been ‘important steps forward but they fail to address the central feminist critique of the continuing oppression of women within patriarchal systems’ (2005: 580).

Molyneux has asked, ‘if, as I argue, the spread of gender awareness and the impact of mainstreaming is exaggerated, how do we explain the current gender ennui when so much is still at stake?’ (2007: 233). She suggests the answer is a darker international political climate, and ‘more effective strategizing and alliance building among conservative forces – popular, governmental and faith-based’ – and ... a troubling loss of vitality and direction of some feminist movements’, despite the presence of dynamic movements in Latin America and parts of Africa and South Asia notwithstanding (ibid.). These circumstances call for the repoliticization of feminist engagement with development. To this end, Cornwall, Harrison and Whitehead (2007: 15) propose that GAD approaches be separated from more challenging proposals and the diversity of feminist engagements with gender/women and development be recognized.

**From Development Anthropology to the Anthropology of ‘Development’**

These efforts to address feminist concerns within development unfolded at the same time as a series of critiques of development in the social sciences, including anthropology (Escober 1991, 1995; Ferguson 1997). Mid-century structural functionalists had studied isolated non-Western peoples, applying a framework within which social change threatened both social and theoretical disruption. But in the 1960s anti-colonial struggles led anthropologists to direct their attention to social change. Dependency theory, along with neo-Marxist mode of production and world-systems theories, was applied to interpreting histories of conquest, imperialism and exploitation. Neo-Marxists argued that what was called development was really the process of capitalist integration. Paradoxically, critiques of capitalist development, together with development’s greater emphasis on social welfare beginning in the 1970s, mentioned above, created opportunities for anthropologists to collaborate with development organizations. This led to the formation of a field called development anthropology.

Under this rubric, many anthropologists began participating in development projects, enlisted to ‘improve the efficiency of planning, to be technician[s], identifying the social and cultural snags that might slow down develop-
ment’ (de Waal 2002: 253). But development anthropology has an uneasy relationship with the discipline. In some quarters it is disparaged as a form of applied anthropology, involving only the application of anthropological knowledge to development problems and making no contribution to anthropological theory. In other quarters, university anthropologists have engaged with development arguing that doing so not only has a positive impact on development, but also advances anthropological theory. Quite remarkably, however, none of the anthropologists who have examined the history of this field have discussed – or even noted – the appearance of women or feminist critiques in debates about development (Hoben 1982; Escobar 1991; Ferguson 1997).

The reflexive critiques of the 1990s gave rise to a new approach to development, widely referred to as the anthropology of ‘development’ (Ferguson [1990] 1994; Escobar 1991, 1995; Hobart 1993; Grillo 1997). Escobar (1991) argued that development anthropology had become disengaged from theoretical debates in the discipline and subsumed into the bureaucratic logic of development agencies. In effect, it had ‘done no more than recycle, and dress in more localized fabrics, the discourses of modernization and development’ (ibid.: 677). He questioned the relationships among anthropology, development and knowledge, including how anthropologists have worked within development paradigms and how these have shaped anthropological knowledge. These critics pointed to the need for anthropologists to broaden their focus from development’s impacts on conventional anthropological subjects such as villages, cultures, indigenous peoples – and women – to encompass the practices, institutions and discourses that constitute ‘development’.

Ferguson ([1990] 1994) and Escobar (1995), the most provocative contributors to this literature, also argued that neo-Marxist critiques of development neglected to examine the social and discursive processes through which economic and political structures are reproduced. Escobar remarked, ‘How unanthropological … to accept an entire historically produced cultural field without probing its depths’ (1991: 161). Applying Foucauldian theory, they called for critical explorations of the nexus of knowledge, power and discourse in development contexts. Ferguson argued that although the Lesotho development project he studied, like Foucault’s prison, failed on its own terms, it nevertheless succeeded due to its regular but unrecognized effects ([1990] 1994: xiv). They challenged anthropologists to explore the power of ‘development’ to shape the lives of people in ‘developing countries’, to provide the dominant mode of representing and understanding them, and to shape forms of resistance. Escobar argued that this was particularly important for the discipline given the clear parallel between development anthropology and anthropology’s historical implication in the exercise of colonial power (1991: 661). He quotes Asad in asking: ‘Does not development today, as colonialism did in a former epoch, make possible “the kind of human intimacy on which anthropological fieldwork is based, but insure that intimacy should be one-sided and provisional’ (1973: 17), even if contemporary subjects move and talk back?’ (Escobar 1995: 14).

With regard to women, Escobar argues that WID is not an emancipatory project. He presents a rather conventional critique of development’s effects on women, beginning with the observation that modernist discourses fail to recognize the productive roles of women (1995: 171) but moving on to discuss women as ‘a client group of even larger proportions … brought into the space of visibility of development’ (1995: 155). The ‘developmentalization’ of women, peasants and nature, he argues, took place in similar ways, revealing ‘discursive regularities at work’ (ibid.). He concludes that ‘we must resist the conclusion that what poor women need is development’ (ibid.) because this ultimately strengthens the
development apparatus and its mediation of relations between First-World feminists and Third-World women (1995: 180). His counter-proposal is to work ‘in and against development’,5 shifting the ‘focus from Third-World women and our need to “help” them to the ruling apparatus’ and to consider ‘the actions of Third World women – whether middle-class feminists or grassroots activists or both – for cues about how power operates and is resisted by women in the Third World’ (1995: 182).

Despite Escobar’s insights into WID approaches and substantive contributions to post-colonial theories (which, in turn, have significant relevance to gender-based studies of development; see also Phillips 1996), neither feminist concerns nor women have figured centrally in the anthropology of ‘development’. Such concerns have remained, as earlier feminists so often decried, at the margins of this perspective on development. As a result, the divide between engaged and purely theoretical approaches to development is perpetuated and the anthropology of ‘development’ remains unenriched by insights from, and debates about, feminism’s long history of engagement with development.

Nevertheless, one of Escobar’s most intriguing proposals was for a reconceptualized ethnography of development (1995: 47–52). But, as I discovered when I undertook a study of a rural development project in Mexico, there has been little discussion of doing ethnography of ‘development’ (cf. Mosse 2005). Studying development ‘outside’ its own logic while participating in its social relationships presents challenges with which all anthropologists – particularly feminist anthropologists – must contend.

What follows is a discussion of methodological and political issues that arose in my project, including the contradiction between the anthropology of ‘development’ as a critical project and the limited possibilities for engagement, including feminist engagement, with development that it presented.

Fieldwork and Engagement in the Anthropology of ‘Development’

Calakmul and the Calakmul Model Forest

My work in the Calakmul region of southeastern Campeche focused on an NGO, the Calakmul Model Forest, created using a Canadian model of multi-stakeholder planning (Murphy 2003a). It was intended to create ‘a model of sustainable development … [and] set … an example for other tropical areas’ (Ministry of Supply and Services Canada 1994). It brought together Mexican rural development professionals and biologists, members of some 72 ejidos,6 and the campesino/a directors and members of the Regional Council of X-Pujil (Consejo Regional Agrosilvopecuario y de Servicios de X-Pujil). Relationships among these groups were fraught with conflict and shaped by hierarchy, as relations between rural development workers, campesino/a leaders, and campesino/as in Mexico have been historically.

Most of the 15,000–20,000 residents of Calakmul arrived as internal migrants, attracted – despite the region’s poor soils and scarcity of water – by the programme of agricultural colonization that began there in the late 1960s and resulted in an ethnically heterogeneous population. The provision of millions of dollars of primarily international funding for ‘integrated conservation and development’ followed the creation of the Calakmul Biosphere Reserve in 1989. This marked a new era in Calakmul and made it an ideal site to examine the interplay between global environmental politics and local notions and practices of development.

My fieldwork focused on the staff of the Model Forest, campesino/a leaders, and one group of intended beneficiaries of development, the members of the Yucatec Maya ejido 20 de Noviembre. Between April 1996 and January 1998 I attended meetings of the Model Forest and Regional Council; interviewed development workers and women political leaders; and, in 20 de Noviembre, did participant observation among the members of the...
three groups, and attended ejidal and women’s meetings.

The feminist dimensions of my project included examining the development discourses and processes through which masculine and feminine gender identities were constituted and reproduced, how women were drawn into – or in some cases rejected – political roles and development projects, and how, from various positions, they sometimes challenged and sometimes reproduced both sustainable development discourses and dominant local gender ideologies, in public and domestic realms. In the course of doing my research I advocated for women. I asked difficult questions when I saw women being excluded, their views discounted or their labour uncompensated.

Fieldwork Challenges in the Anthropology of ‘Development’

During my first weeks in Calakmul, I presented my research project to the three groups. To distance myself from ‘development’ and to communicate my interest in a topic with cultural resonance, I explained that my research was about work: the work people do in organizations and communities, the work campesino/as do on and off their ejidos and the work women and men do. Indeed, campesina discussions about development projects focused as much on working conditions, requirements to contribute unpaid labour, and the authoritarianism of development workers, as on economic benefits of participating in projects. Although this tactic was helpful, it could not entirely displace me from the position in development ascribed to me in response to my nationality, fair colouring and socio-economic status.

When I first arrived in Calakmul several people were eager to tell me about the wonderful things being done by and for women there. I was disconcerted to learn that the biggest events had involved handicrafts, food preparation and a Mother’s Day celebration. How, I asked myself, did such celebrations of women’s family roles and reproductive labour fit into ‘sustainable development’? Where were these ideas for women’s projects coming from? Did international donors not have more progressive gender policies than this? Was no one talking about challenging dominant gender ideologies? I was somewhat at a loss how to locate myself, as a woman, as a researcher and as a feminist, in relation to these kinds of initiatives. If I were critical I might seem to be belittling the women’s efforts and undermining the gains that had been made, but feigning enthusiasm would have been patronising.

I also knew that both men and women in Calakmul were curious whether or not this educated Canadian gringa was a feminista. I understood I was entering a field of highly contentious gender relations where notions of femininity, masculinity, women’s and men’s respective roles – and sexual relations – were recognized to be subjects of gendered, inter-ethnic, inter-class and inter-national contest. Male development workers provoked me with sexist jokes and warned me that if I was a First-World feminist (feminista primer-mundista) women would not want to talk to me because I did not share their values related to motherhood and the family. I was also concerned that being categorized as someone ‘working with women’ might result in my exclusion from the masculine spaces of development, especially those of the Model Forest, that were also important to my study. But what were the implications of my spatial transgressions, of my insistence on inclusion in events from which local women were excluded?

Reaction to my first activities revealed local understandings of the role of social researchers in relation to development. Over and over again, I was asked in which community I was going to work. Hanging around with development workers in the administrative town was seen as socializing, not work. In Calakmul, as elsewhere, the correct objects of development are villages, and therefore villages are also the correct objects of development research.
The controversy that accompanied my choice of case study ejido clarified expectations of reciprocity between researcher and study community. The Yucatec Maya ejido 20 de Noviembre had the reputation of being one of the best organized in Calakmul and two geography students had recently worked there. I was told this ejido did not need any further study to determine how it could be better organized. There was also a concern among Model Forest staff that researchers should be more evenly distributed among the ejidos where it was implementing projects. Some said this was so that the cultural heterogeneity of the region would be better represented in research, and especially that Yucatec Maya communities not be overrepresented. Another factor was that ‘having’ a researcher was seen as an advantage to an ejido because s/he could foster closer relations between its members and development organizations and draw attention – possibly even resources – to its needs.

Doing research on development organizations raises many questions. How does the researcher overcome organizations’ reluctance to come under the kind of scrutiny entailed in the anthropology of ‘development’ and their scepticism about the utility of such research? What kinds of ethical responsibilities does an ethnographer have to development workers and organizations?

The staff of the Calakmul Model Forest alternated between helpfulness and hostility. Workers held divergent opinions of me, my activities and my potential utility to the Model Forest or to them personally. I tried to make clear that my goal was to learn about the organization, but that I was willing to contribute to its projects. Several possibilities for collaboration were proposed but subsequently withdrawn. The degree of conflict within the organization presented an ethnographic challenge, and the Model Forest, like many other development organizations, carefully controlled the flow of information about its work.

The directors of the Regional Council of X-Pujil were even more reluctant than the Model Forest workers to talk with me. At first I attributed this to economic and cultural distance, but after I learned that some of them were diverting Model Forest funds I realized that no effort at ‘building rapport’ was likely to succeed. In the end, two disaffected former directors – both women – did talk to me. Their perspectives were very important in building my understanding of the Regional Council.

Another difficulty in the anthropology of ‘development’ is to learn about the perspectives of people and groups divided by multiple, constantly shifting antagonisms, including men and women. I could not appear to support, or to be allied with, any group for fear of not being able to talk to its critics. Only with time and patience did I earn the confidence of members of opposing groups and the reputation of someone who asked about disputes without wanting to get involved and did not repeat what I was told in confidence. But maintaining neutrality was an imperfect art, as friendships and ethnographic relationships sometimes worked together and sometimes were at odds, and political alignments constantly shifted.

The need to practice reciprocity also challenged neutrality. Reciprocity is essential in an impoverished region like Calakmul, but how does one find forms of reciprocity that are culturally appropriate but do not undermine neutrality or implicate one in the logic of development? Some were convinced that I had influence over project staff if not access to resources of the Model Forest and pressured me to act on their behalves. I was particularly concerned that this perception would encourage campesino/as, in our conversations and interviews, to present only positive views of the Model Forest and of themselves as ideal recipients of development assistance.

The pressure to justify my presence by behaving more like a development worker provoked nagging doubts about the usefulness
of my project and theoretical perspective. But what would participating more directly in development and its historically accrued practices and meanings, its hierarchies and patron-client relations – apparently so little transformed by ‘integrated conservation and development’ – have contributed?

Foucauldian perspectives on rural development, concerned with fields of power and meaning and the constructedness of development categories and identities, offer a bracing rush of fresh air into academic debates. But after being asked for the umpteenth time what my work would do to improve people’s lives, trying to deconstruct development in a context of deprivation and insecurity and through frameworks not part of local conversations felt like a self indulgent intellectual exercise. I grappled with the contradiction between the anthropology of ‘development’, whose political project is to expose the workings of power, and the few possibilities for engagement this kind of research appears to open, at least in rural Mexico. Local expectations of development research, together with my feminist concerns, made this contradiction even more disconcerting. Is the anthropology of ‘development’ purely a project to document and theoretically elaborate the workings of development discourses, or does it have the potential to contribute to emancipatory projects, including feminist ones?

**Forms of Engagement**

Ferguson and Escobar both questioned how anthropologists could challenge ‘development’. Ferguson suggested that anthropologists seek out ‘typically non-state forces and organizations that challenge the existing dominant order and see if links can be found between our expertise and their practical needs as they determine them ([1990] 1994: 286–287). Escobar suggested that ‘a first approach … is to look for alternative practices in the resistance grass-roots groups present to dominant intervention’ (1995: 222). But he also signalled the importance of ethnographies as political projects: ‘The deconstruction of development, coupled with … local ethnographies … can be important elements for a new type of visibility and audibility of forms of cultural difference and hybridization that researchers have generally glossed over until now’ (ibid.: 223).

Both authors propose involving the anthropologist as a political actor outside development. But what is one to do in a place like Calakmul where there is no group or movement opposing development and where women, for example, use development discourses to describe their family’s needs in terms of ‘projects, assistance and things’? With similar concerns, Phillips expressed ‘feminist cynicism about the alternative antidevelopment “spaces” that some claim are now being generated by peoples in the South’ (1996: 28). If development discourses are as ubiquitous and pervasive as Escobar himself argues, and if modernist discourses more generally supersaturate the life-worlds of Calakmul, as in so many areas of Latin America, is there a danger that the search for these ‘spaces of resistance’ responds to an ethnographic desire for development’s ‘other’? And yet, to assume or conclude that development cannot be and is not resisted is to overlook ethnographic evidence of the agency that people exercise in engaging with it and of the complexity of these engagements (Mosse 2005).

The apparently limited potential of the anthropology of ‘development’ to effect change has concerned Grillo, among others. He notes how ‘Ferguson, like Escobar, ends with an appeal for a rather feeble and restricted form of politically correct anthropology’ (1997: 19). He sees greater potential for change in the active, but not naïve, involvement of anthropologists with the institutions of development, a view echoed by Mosse (2005) and Mosse and Lewis (2006) and those feminists who have worked directly with development organizations.
But in her discussion of postcolonial methodologies in gender and development, Phillips (1996) cautions that the position of anthropologists who are interested in development with women, for example, is difficult. Basic analytical categories such as ‘women’ and ‘development’ must be examined in order to face ‘the modernist foundation in which many feminist theories are rooted’ and the researcher must interrogate her role, methods of doing research, and political intentions and practices’ (ibid.: 16). Furthermore, ‘We must make our research goals explicit (as contradictory as they may be) and analyze our role in reproducing and/or undermining representations of Third World women in our research’ (ibid.: 28). This kind of feminist project is consistent with the anthropology of ‘development’ and its deconstructive aims, although it casts the project in different terms.

Echoing Escobar’s comments on ethnography as a political project, Watts identified a specific contribution that ethnographic approaches in the anthropology of ‘development’ can make: to ‘identify struggles and spaces in which important changes can be and are made’ (2001: 286). Thus examining women’s struggles ‘in and against development’, as I did, can be both an ethnographic and a feminist project. I documented the ways in which women engaged with development, and how these created opportunities for women to challenge dominant local gender ideologies (including the ones encoded in development discourse), the obstacles they encountered, their successes and the ways in which their involvement reproduced their marginality. Ethnographic work on women’s engagements with development does reveal arenas of struggle and potential transformation and provide insights that can contribute to imagining new ways for feminists to engage with development, ways less restricted that those proposed by gender mainstreaming and closer to the repoliticization of feminism’s relationship to development that has been called for.

**Conclusion: Confronting Disengagement**

Given the contentious debates about the relationships among anthropology, feminism and development, it is not surprising that there are challenges to a feminist anthropology of ‘development’ that attempts to confront disengagement on several fronts. While some who work closely with development organizations object to the anthropology of ‘development’ and development anthropology are painted with the same brush, similarly rejected as applied research that makes no contribution to theory. For example, in an effort to make my Calakmul research useful to debates about gender and development, I presented relevant findings in an interdisciplinary feminist journal (Murphy 2003b). An anthropological colleague later dismissed the article, commenting that the journal it had appeared in ‘could not possibly be described as a mainstream scholarly publication (the journal characterizes itself … as “actively working towards serving as a middle ground between the scholarly and the popular, between theory and activism)’’. Is it possible that anthropologists inclined to be dismissive of development as a research topic are further aggravated when feminist perspectives are also involved?

But how could this be at a time when funding agencies, in Canada at least, are calling for research results to be communicated and applied more broadly? Clearly the political and intellectual trends of the current moment are contradictory. Researchers are called upon to ‘partner with the community to put knowledge into action’, but the reflexive epistemologies that are central to engaged research are less highly valued than positivist social science.

Nevertheless, some have strongly argued that the anthropology of ‘development’ is cen-
tral to the discipline. Mosse and Lewis concluded that we are at ‘the end of a long period of mutual marginalization’ of anthropology and development (2006: 1); and de Waal notes how ‘the aid industry itself – its institutions, its morality, its symbolism and logic, and its interaction with those whom it calls “recipients” or “beneficiaries” … has become a rich and important subject for anthropological inquiry’ (2002: 261). Moreover, as Mosse and Lewis note, ‘an anthropology of development is inextricably an anthropology of contemporary Africa, Latin America, and Asia’ (2006: 1), as elsewhere.

But as interest in the anthropology of ‘development’ grows, the question of engagement remains. We must correct the disconnection between the anthropological critique of ‘development’ and feminist work in this area if we are to respond to calls for equitable social change. The challenge is to explore forms of engagement offered by a more radical perspective on development and to defend them in the current academic climate. In facing this challenge, the history and current dilemmas of feminist engagements with development offer not only important experiences for examination, but must also serve to remind all working ‘in and against’ development of the continued need to place gender issues at the centre, not the periphery. Disentangling the contradiction between reflexive critiques of, and feminist engagements with, development will require us to forge new academic paths and to challenge established dogmas that obstruct the way. A feminist anthropology of ‘development’ could make important contributions to contemporary anthropology, feminism and development.

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Notes

1. In his seminal book, The Anti-politics Machine, Ferguson placed the word ‘development’ in quotation marks every time it appeared, ‘in the hope that this will not prove tiresome, but will rather serve as a reminder to the reader that the book aims to problematize this concept’ (1990: xi). I have followed this practice in my use of the term anthropology of ‘development’ and in a few cases where I too wanted to draw attention to the problematic nature of the concept.

2. Events in Canada in 2010, however, demonstrated that development assistance continues to be a site for feminist engagement. The revelation that a new international maternal and child health initiative specifically avoided funding for abortion, contrary to earlier policies as well as those of other G8 countries participating in the initiative, led to widespread outrage. Pro-choice and feminist advocates repeatedly squared off against defenders of the new policy over this issue in Parliament and in the national media.

3. British anthropologists, in particular, have been effective in combining anthropology and engaged development research, including feminist development research (e.g. Moser 1993; Mosse 2005). Highly skilled anthropologists have worked in the World Bank, USAID and similar agencies elsewhere, including the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA). I am unaware, however, of contributions they have made to critical anthropological/ethnographic projects of the kind described by Escobar.

4. I do not intend in this discussion of Escobar and Ferguson’s perspectives to dismiss all anthropological contributions to the study of develop-
ment that do not respond to their theoretical proposals. My focus, rather, is on raising questions about the possibilities for feminist engagement by anthropologists who do work with their proposals. This article also reflects the particular forms the relationships between development, anthropology and feminism have taken in Canada – my personal and academic home – and in Mexico – my research site and second academic home.


6. Ejidos are agrarian communities, established according to Mexico’s 1917 post-revolutionary Agrarian Law.

References


Murphy, J. E. (2003a), ‘Ethnography and Sustainable Development in the Calakmul Model Forest, Campeche, Mexico’ (PhD diss., York University, Toronto).


