Editorial: imperial crisis and the millennium goals

Poverty is 'big business'. Donor funds are set to increase substantially as the UN millennium targets—to eradicate extreme poverty and halve the number of people suffering from hunger by 2015—seem ever more out of reach. Small wonder that social science methods to assess levels of poverty and the results of development projects have become a hot issue, too. As much of the research on poverty directly feeds into policy making and donor strategies, people are rightly concerned about its quality. Anthropology has a stake in this debate: despite the hegemony of quantitative methods in development research, participatory rural appraisals and poverty assessments have always drawn upon anthropological methods. One might wonder what happens to these qualitative methods in research that aims to establish quantitative levels of poverty.

Campbell and Holland's special section addresses these questions. They conclude among other things that the debate on poverty research tends to be driven by questions of methodological innovation at the expense of serious theoretical discussion about the nature, validity, and use of specific sorts of data. One of their central points of concern is that methodologies used in policy-oriented poverty research are not under the same scrutiny as methodologies employed in other areas of social science research. The articles offer insights into the flawed measurement techniques used in some recent poverty studies, the policy interests behind them, and the serious errors of judgment that were the result. It is obvious that the combination of qualitative and quantitative approaches in development research tends to reduce anthropological approaches to a toothless handmaiden of statistics-based insights. Theoretical debate on the nature of and rationale behind specific styles of data gathering is called for.

Fighting poverty is obviously based not only on noble feelings of altruism. In public debates

and in the media, 'poor, uncivilized, barbaric' populations are increasingly depicted as a security risk to the world order and a potential source of instability and violence. Hence, a less explicit and less noble—but therefore no less important—reasoning behind development aid goes as follows: "If we help the poor to increase their levels of subsistence, they will not turn violent, contract mortal contagious diseases (such as AIDS), and migrate to the West." In most European countries, the influx of migrants from poor and war-struck regions in the world is considered a serious threat to national identity and social cohesion. In this volume, Pansters takes issue with the debate on cultural pluralism in Europe and the prevailing fear of loss of national identity by presenting an in-depth study of how national identity and the debates around national culture have evolved in Mexico. He analyzes how state projects directed at the construction of a national identity in twentieth-century Mexico were part of the establishment of a highly authoritarian political regime. Però also contextualizes present-day political debates about migration and ethnicity by presenting the radically different meanings attributed to the migration of Southerners to Bologna in the 1960s and 1970s. These studies of different times and regions are crucial to open up and contextualize the rather crude debate about migration and the assumed danger for national identity in present-day Western Europe.

Returning to the discussion on poverty and development intervention, we might ask what effects could be expected of the multiple efforts of the aid industry. Several authors argue that in many situations, instead of improving the situation of the poor, development interventions lead instead to a deterioration of their economic situation and even to violent conflict. Others point out that development intervention

is frequently motivated by interests other than the fight against poverty. De Vries shows these different interests in the implementation of an integrated rural development project funded by the United States Aid Agency (USAID) in a settlement scheme in the Atlantic zone of Costa Rica. He reveals the contradictions involved in the application of popular notions, such as good governance, participation, and accountability, in politically motivated development projects. In this case, the USAID project proved unsuccessful in introducing innovative farming systems, but was quite successful in its implicit political aim of destroying the power base of radical peasant movements.

This brings us finally to the forum discussion between Reyna and Friedman, both of whom—though disagreeing on several theoretical points—are equally pessimistic about the political and economic events in the world today and the increasing incidence of violence. Their

explanation of the causes of violence, however, differs from the one that is usually given by the media and pop-science. Contrary to many theories that see the cause of violence in barbarism, poverty, and lack of civilization in underdeveloped regions, Reyna and Friedman warn that it is the logic of capitalist accumulation and imperial-power-in-crisis that is the overriding source of violence today and in the years to come. Declining hegemony and control over strategic regions and resources such as oil are the current triggers that provoke large-scale violence. Although they agree on this point, Reyna and Friedman disagree on the type of world power constellation that will eventually result from this struggle. Whatever the outcome of this imperial crisis, it is not very likely that in the new landscape of power the millennium goals will have come any closer to being achieved.

— *Monique Nuijten*