Social reproduction, situated politics, and *The Will to Improve*

Tania Murray Li

In this essay I briefly explore three themes I find important for an engaged anthropology of development. First, *social reproduction*: Anthropologists have a long track record of examining processes of social reproduction—how it is that particular patterns of inequality are actively sustained through practices and relations at multiple scales (Smith 1999). Unless we understand the social forces responsible for poverty production, schemes for poverty reduction have no hope. Yet development programmers, constrained as they are by the need to find technical points of entry for their programs, seldom do this kind of analysis. Nor do many activists, who are committed to particular icons and issue-based campaigns. An engaged ethnography potentially rounds out their data, keeping issues of social reproduction in the field of vision.

Second, *situated politics*: Analyzing politics means asking about the social forces that sustain the reproduction of inequality, how they are changing, and how they can be changed. What are the relevant social groups, their interests, their alliances, and lines of fracture? Which groups would support a shift in the relations of poverty production, and which would mobilize to prevent it? Change does occur. The taming of capitalism in the form of the welfare state is one example. Every conjuncture has potential openings, possibilities that can be identified and expanded. Yet I seldom see this kind of analysis in development policy documents. They propose

that governments should do this, or communities should do that, with little analysis of the social forces required to bring such a shift about. Activists tend to be much more adept at this kind of analysis, because it is a central requirement of their own political practice. As ethnographers we can contribute explorations of how practices of politics arise and how they are provoked. We can also engage in our own practices of politics, appropriate to our situation.

Third, *The Will to Improve*: Examining improvement schemes, their rationales and effects, is especially productive when conducted in conjunction with the other forms of analysis I have just outlined. This was the task I attempted in my 2007 book, by examining improvement schemes in relation to the social forces that produce, configure, and limit them. It is true that people mobilize to devour development plans, like crumbs thrown into an ant nest, in James Ferguson's memorable image (1994: 225); or push and pull programs into helpful yet unapproved forms, like the transformation of participatory planning into extended patronage, in David Mosse's account (2005). Nevertheless, these programs of intervention do something. They intersect with processes of social reproduction and practices of politics in significant ways. Yet development schemes are only one of many social forces transforming the world. I believe that ethnographers should attend to them but not necessarily give them center stage.

In the pages to follow I examine each of these themes in turn, drawing on my own experiences as an ethnographer, critical interlocutor, and occasional consultant. In taking this approach, I have in mind the “participant objectivation” advocated by Bourdieu (2003) and brilliantly explored by David Mosse (2006) in his response to a hostile reception of his ethnography of a development project. Bourdieu urged each of us to examine our own points of view, and the kinds of knowledge we produce, not through self-indulgent navel-gazing but by viewing them sociologically, as a product of our social and academic formation and our professional location. I begin in a distanced voice, the voice of a scholar trained in a culturally inflected political economy, in which the main task is to examine the sets of material and social resources upon which livelihoods are based, track the relations through which they are accessed, and explore how these relations are sustained or changed through struggles that are at once meaningful and material. In the next section, I examine practices of politics in an objectified way, as a phenomenon ‘out there’ in the world, before shifting into reflective mode to situate my own political practice, shaped as it is by my training and professional location. Finally, I turn to *The Will to Improve*, to reflect on my engagements with development as a consultant and how they have shaped my conviction that the roles of programmer and critic should remain distinct.

Social reproduction: The Kecamatan Development Project in practice

In *The Will to Improve* (2007) I examined the Kecamatan Development Project (KDP), a massive, billion-dollar project designed by the social development team of the World Bank in Jakarta, operative in almost every district across the Indonesian archipelago. The design team made extensive use of ethnographic methods in order to find out how power works in Indonesian villages, and they devised a very detailed set of procedures to enable villagers to participate in decisions about the allocation of funds for small

infrastructure projects, elect their own representatives to control the funds, and hold these people to high standards of transparency, accountability, and quality control. As I explained in the book, the aim was to alleviate poverty, but not through a frontal attack on what the team called “economic factors.” The team linked their program to poverty reduction through a notion of empowerment. By adhering to the project procedures, villagers would acquire new skills, habits, and expectations that would carry over after the project’s end, empowering the poor to demand and obtain better services from their government.

In 2006, after the book went to press, I spent two months in one of my field sites in Central Sulawesi—not the site that I describe in *The Will to Improve* but the second, more remote site, where I have conducted field research intermittently since 1990. Since my last visit in 1998, KDP had arrived. So too had a set of other transformations, notably, the end of the Suharto regime, administrative decentralization giving more authority to the districts, and an intensified struggle over land in the rugged mountainous interior of the peninsula as indigenous farmers, migrants, and members of the regional political and economic elite sought to profit from new markets for commercial tree crops, especially cacao. The visit gave me the opportunity to see what difference KDP had made in village-level planning, something I had observed quite closely throughout the 1990s, and to situate KDP in relation to broader shifts in social forces, including the emergence of landlessness and a new landlord class in the hills.

My first indication of a shift was a meeting with the district head, at which he talked enthusiastically about the new focus of the government on improving the lives of the poor living in the hills, who had been sorely neglected during the previous era. His narrative had a patriotic twist: it was shameful, he said, that six decades after independence the people of the hills were still living in a primitive state, without roads or access to education. The last time I talked to a district head, neglected highlanders were nowhere on his horizon. So this was differ-

ent. To solve the problem, he was determined to build roads into the hills, combining funds from KDP with routine budget allocations. I described to him the results of my studies about the link between road building, the arrival of outsiders, and the rapid dispossession of highlanders who retreated further into the hills—away from the schools and the road intended to help them. He acknowledged the problem and told me about his solution to it: “I gather them together and I tell them not to sell their land.” In his vision, wise words from a paternalistic politician would be enough to stop dispossession in its tracks, or enough, rather, to deflect the ‘inconvenient knowledge’ of a scholar interested in processes of social reproduction.

The subdistrict and village heads I spoke to next echoed the district head’s concern for the poor and his enthusiasm for the road-building program. The material incentives are easy to spot: access to the hills would give them the opportunity to play broker, allocating land to outsiders as well as expanding their own landholdings. But according to KDP rules, government officials and their allies in the regional economic elite are not the people who decide on the use of project funds. Plans are the result of a carefully managed consultation process in which every hamlet, even the most distant and marginal, *must* participate. If they are absent, a planning meeting cannot proceed. The KDP facilitator—a paid consultant from outside the local government apparatus—is charged with ensuring that these rules are followed and applying sanctions if they are not. So I went along with one of the facilitators when she was working in a hill area I know quite well, to see how this worked out in practice.

Faithful to KDP principles, the facilitator insisted that the planning meeting to initiate a new project cycle should be held in the hills, or at least as far into the hills as she and her team could go without walking—at the end of the new road, built in the previous year’s KDP project cycle. When our group arrived on the back of a small fleet of motorbike-taxis, a few people had gathered, but not the crowd the facilitator expected or required if she was to proceed. After waiting a couple of hours, she called on a sub-

district official who was serving as interpreter to ask if a representative of each of the hamlets was present. There was an awkward pause. The official called off the numbers—hamlets 1 to 12—to see if someone was there. Different voices from the crowd responded with a vague affirmative. Since the facilitator did not know the village and did not speak the local language, she was not in a position to verify. I later confirmed that no one from the more distant hamlets was present at the meeting. In conversations with me over the following week, they described their exclusion in terms of a barrier that blocks information and resources in its path. They also described the ‘crocodiles’ that guard the path to make sure this situation does not change. KDP has rules to prevent this—an elaborate system to prevent elite capture. Yet the project’s carefully crafted control system was defeated by the pragmatics of a long, hot, tiring day; the likelihood that the crowd would dissipate because they had no lunch; and the facilitator’s need to keep to a rigorous schedule for program delivery, report writing, and audit. So she ticked the box and moved along.

The first activity on the meeting agenda was to elect the villagers who would lead the consultation process. Candidates were proposed and the illiterate crowd placed paper ballots in containers. I later found out that the person handing out the ballots had signaled to the voters that the correct answer was number 3. Number 3 was duly elected. There were grumbles about that, too, in subsequent conversations, as number 3 was a person the highlanders did not trust. Caught in webs of debt and dependence with the village elite who live on the coast, and ashamed at their inability to speak Indonesian in front of high-status outsiders, they had been intimidated. Later, they regretted that they had not had the courage to speak out. As the meeting rolled along, the official/interpreter talked about the opportunity provided by KDP funds to extend the new road farther into the hills and build a bridge connecting the hamlets on the other side of the river. The facilitator, through the same interpreter, emphasized that they—the people—would decide about the use of the funds, through

a consultation process that would involve many meetings over many months. But the highlanders had already understood the message—the correct answer was the road and the bridge. So they did not see much point in meetings.

Even if the highlanders had discussed their preferred uses for KDP funds in their hamlets, the outcome might have been the same. The better-off highland farmers would opt for the road, because roads enable them to get their cacao down to the market by motorbike instead of by paying porters. The poorer highlanders, who work as porters, would be silent, or absent from the planning meetings. Porterage is the most lucrative income-earning opportunity for the new landless class in the hills, those who have sold their land to neighbors who have been more successful at establishing and extending productive commercial farms. It is backbreaking work. The teenage son of a widow I knew well died of a hemorrhage as he forced himself to carry excessive loads. When I discussed with landowners what would happen to the porters when the road arrived, they had no comment. KDP's designers understood very well that there is little natural solidarity in Indonesia's villages. Yet they still believed they could intervene on the side of the poor simply by insisting on procedures for including their voices, and their choices, in the planning process. In this case, not only did the benefits of voice fail to materialize or to result in poverty-reducing shifts in power, the processes of poverty production actually intensified. Coastal elites have moved in wherever new roads are planned, buying up or simply laying claim to the land and holding it for speculation. Meanwhile, the poor still walk along the old footpaths that follow the riverbeds, since these are shorter and not as hot as the new roads. They cannot afford to use the motorbike-taxis. Thus, KDP's micromanaged planning process did not alter the social forces that perpetuate inequality and inadvertently supported them.

In another case I tracked in a different village, highlanders mobilized to protest against corruption, in just the way KDP planners promoting village empowerment intended. Armed with crucial information, namely, the amount of

money allocated for building a road to their hamlet, they monitored closely. They interviewed the driver of the bulldozer hired to do the work and found out the cost per day for the machine and his labor. They calculated that the budget was more than sufficient for the road to reach their hamlet. Instead, it stopped about halfway. The village headman told the highlanders the money was insufficient, but because of KDP's transparency rules, the highlanders knew precisely how much had been stolen from them, and they were furious. Learning that the district head was to visit the highlands, a group of men, some of them clutching blowpipes, waited where the road ends to present their grievance. Unsurprisingly, although they waited all day, the district head did not arrive. Their protests to the village head and the subdistrict head fell on deaf ears, and the highlanders' assumption was that they had all been paid off. So the highlanders had information and they united to take action, but they still had no means of redress. KDP's attempts to increase villagers' access to the means of holding corrupt officials to account have yet to reach this corner of Sulawesi, where powers are entrenched and project rules easily circumvented. This particular road-building project, although it used the KDP rule book, was one of the new-generation 'indigenized' versions of KDP that no longer uses facilitators hired directly by the Bank but returns control of the project process to bureaucrats who are presumed to have learned—and to desire—new and improved ways.

How reformed is the bureaucracy in this area? Subdistrict officials I knew from the 1990s acknowledged that KDP was much tighter than the old system—there were far fewer opportunities to steal funds. As they pointed out to me, this gave them less incentive to be involved, and it also made them impatient with endless meetings to elicit the planning priorities of backward highlanders in distant hamlets. The aspect of the project they and the villagers appreciated least was the KDP proposal procedure that sets hamlets and villages in competition with each other over project funds. Although the criterion for selection was supposed to favor proposals

that were most convincingly ‘pro-poor,’ comparing the list of KDP projects in the subdistrict with my knowledge of patterns of poverty did not convince me that this process was working, and no one else with whom I discussed the matter thought it was, either. All too obviously, equal opportunity to compete did not produce equitable results. Overall, my conclusion was that neither KDP, nor the ‘reform’ movement that removed Suharto from power, nor the two together, had been able to engineer a shift in social forces sufficient to reorientate planning toward the poor in this part of Sulawesi. Such a shift may still emerge, and irate highlanders scrutinizing a project budget and uniting to protest are possibly an advance sign of it, but the counterforces are still formidable.

Situated politics

It is my training as a scholar with a particular academic formation that enables me to analyze how social inequality is reproduced in my field site. I see what I am trained to see. I can extend the same analytic to the arena of political struggle by asking this question: If the social reproduction of inequality is so stubborn, what are the social forces that can change it? This question is forward looking and invites a comparative perspective that examines the kinds of social forces that have been effective at other times and places.

Among the forms of political struggle one can identify from the literature are the following:

- (1) Popular mobilization of the spatially situated, “militant particular” variety (Smith 1999) as in the example of the half-completed road I described above.
- (2) Building coalitions of mobilized groups, such as the peasant, student, and labor unions and middle-class prodemocracy groups that together ended Suharto’s rule in Indonesia.
- (3) The construction of a broad-based alliance capable of sustaining a political program, evident in the cross-class alliance that brought organized labor and social reformers in Britain together in 1945 to create a welfare state. These broad alliances are the product of the persuasive work Gramsci called hegemonic: the production of a narrative that articulates or connects particular interests to an encompassing vision to which differently situated subjects give their consent.
- (4) The practice of critique, by which I mean scrutinizing unjust practices and processes from the perspective that they are socially formed and could be changed.

Listing these distinct forms of politics helps clarify the socially situated positions associated with each of them. Critique is the most broadly distributed: without it, no one would mobilize. The highlanders protesting the theft of funds designated to build their road had a definite critique, which centered on social processes and ethics. On the one hand, they observed the tight alliance that linked corrupt villagers to senior officials and politicians, all protecting each other from exposure. To this they counterposed their virtue and their vulnerability. As one highlander put it, “We would not dare to steal like that. Our own family would kill us.” When I explained to this person that the highlanders should have been in control of the funds, if KDP rules were followed, he thought this was an excellent idea, but one unlikely to be realized in view of the long and bitter experience of this hamlet—like the other hamlet I described earlier—with rapacious ‘crocodiles’ in the path.

Some remarkable activist-scholars I have worked with in Indonesia over the years are engaged politically on multiple levels: supporting villagers in situated struggles against land seizure or eviction, pulling together different social groups and platforms into a unified front to pressure the government to address grievances, and persuading politicians and officials that they too would be more secure and prosperous if the most egregious injustices were addressed. They embrace the educative role of the intellectual as they attempt to reconstitute the hegemonic field. Their media writings are directed primarily to-

ward their own class, as they seek to shift the boundaries of what fellow newspaper readers accept as normal, shaming them out of their indifference. They also prepare detailed critiques of unjust laws, policies, and programs of intervention, challenging the programmers' monopoly on the production of authoritative knowledge.

At this point in my narrative, I will deepen the reflexive mode that I have thus far limited to characterizing my academic formation, in order to write a bit more about my professional situation and how it is reflected in my own practice of politics. From my situation, as an academic based in Canada, I have found that the political practice for which I am best suited, and effectively sited, is a practice of critique directed primarily toward fellow academics, activists, and planners imbued with *The Will to Improve*. My goal in the book was to historicize the practice of improvement, to make it strange in order to scrutinize its peculiar form of knowledge, its practices, and its effects. Critique is not condemnation. It is an opening, a challenge to think differently about what is and what might be. Nor is it prescription. I do not presume to tell Indonesian activists, officials, development planners, or my fellow academics, what they should do. Like Ferguson (1994), I assume that people already know the tactics proper to their situation. I am constantly encouraged by the critical insights of others. In the different circles in which I move—among students, villagers, activists, officials, donors, colleagues—I seldom find passivity and quiescence. Nor do I encounter a monolithic governmental machine producing subjects or controlling social processes at will. For the reasons Foucault explains in his analysis of the prison system, the outcomes of programming are always refractory. Inadvertently, they help stimulate a permanent, distributed, but always situated capacity for politics. I find this way of thinking about politics enabling. Critique suspended in a vacuum in which no one else is thinking and acting politically would be pointless. Critique is productive when it works as “an instrument for those who fight, those who resist and refuse what is” (Foucault 1991: 84). I hope my critique will be productive in this way, al-

though there are no guarantees. It is only one of several ways of practicing politics, and readers will take from it what they can use for their own purposes.

The Will to Improve

Critique, argues Foucault, “doesn’t have to lay down the law for the law. It isn’t a stage in programming. It is a challenge directed to what is” (Foucault 1991: 84). My refusal to link the critique in *The Will to Improve* directly to a new program frustrates some of my interlocutors. Yet I argued in the book and hold to the position that there are sound reasons to keep the positions of critic and programmer distinct. A central feature of programming is the requirement that problems be framed in terms amenable to technical solutions. Programming demands closure: a decision to dig in here, to tackle one problem, and set another aside. The opening up that is intrinsic to critique can only be accomplished when the demands of programming are suspended, at least for a while. I came to this recognition through my own experience as an occasional development consultant. Knowing that I had to end a report with a recommendation about what the agency should do, I worked backward: from feasible types of recommendation—the kinds of recommendation that an aid agency is potentially in a position to act on—to relevant types of data and analysis. The effect on me was visceral. The telos of programming obliged me to think and write in a different way. Further, the experience formed me in a way that is reflected in my academic writings, as I will explain through an example.

In 2003 the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) announced that it would design a 50 million CAD program on Environmental Governance and Sustainable Livelihoods in Sulawesi. I was asked to prepare a background report on agrarian reform and land rights. I was tempted: this is material I have worked on for more than a decade. I have on my bookshelves scores of books and reports by the Indonesian activists working on these topics. I know the de-

bates, and I thought I could help orient CIDA and connect them to the people in the Indonesian activist networks to whom they should be speaking. That this topic was on CIDA's agenda was, I thought, significant progress. From 1986 to 1989 I worked for an earlier-generation CIDA program called Environment Management Development in Indonesia, which envisaged the field of environment in terms of technical regulations for impact assessment and pollution control. I thought the project's urban, industrial emphasis was misplaced: it failed to recognize that key environmental problems in Indonesia are social and political, and predominantly agrarian. I was also misplaced in the project. As an anthropologist, I had no technical or substantive input. Neither CIDA nor the Indonesian ministry responsible for the project saw any use for my skills in social analysis.

In designing its new environmental governance program for Indonesia in 2003, by contrast, CIDA showed an acute awareness of the agrarian dimensions of environmental management. CIDA planners were alerted to the damage caused by Suharto's dispossessory regime as resource conflicts erupted all over the archipelago after his ouster in 1998. Further, an impressive set of NGO activists had taken up these issues and were gaining attention in the media and among officials, in Sulawesi and elsewhere, as I outlined above. CIDA officials seemed to recognize that the goals of the CIDA initiative—environmental governance and sustainable livelihoods—could not be reached if land rights were not addressed. It was the potential to help align a CIDA program to support the political forces attempting to craft a new vision of resource management centered on social justice that tempted me to take on the work.

In my report I explained the background to the land problem, condensed a decade of field research into a dozen boxed case studies, and pointed out some of the ways in which a poorly designed project could backfire and make matters worse. But I was hard pressed to find a technical point of intervention into which the project could insert itself. A development agency's room for maneuver on issues of resource access

is highly constrained. The only intervention I could think up was one that diffused the politics into a process of consultation. I thought CIDA could perhaps stretch the limits a bit by selecting as the program's principal "partners" the Indonesian activists working on land rights from a social justice perspective. An opening for such an intervention had been created by the passing of the Decree on Agrarian Reform and Natural Resource Management (TAP MPR IX, 2001) by Indonesia's highest legislative body as a result of years of lobbying by activists. Here was an officially sanctioned umbrella for some potentially progressive changes, as well as an opening for CIDA: by taking on land issues, it would not be seen as working against the government but working for it—to help implement the changes promised in the decree. A case could be made for donor involvement: two years after it was passed, the decree was languishing. It could use some profile, resources, and programs to begin to make real the rights and resolutions it promised villagers struggling over land.

My attempt to push the boundaries of a technical intervention toward the pole of an engaged politics was not successful. I heard subsequently that some members of the planning team appreciated my analysis. However, others thought the attention to contentious issues of land rights was too political. The project should focus on improving livelihoods, where donor dollars could make a tangible difference. If they had read the chapters of my book about failed livelihood interventions around a Sulawesi national park, they might have recognized that livelihood improvements present their own difficulties, because they too depend on resource access, especially in agrarian settings. One CIDA insider who read my report, then read the entire manuscript for the book, wanted to press on with the land questions I had raised but confessed to being "scared off" by the complexities I had revealed. I would have liked to help the project planners by supplying a simpler narrative, but I could not think of one.

With these experiences in mind—the experience of working backward from potentially acceptable intervention to diagnosis of the prob-

lem to be solved, and the experience of having a report that failed to identify the right kind of problem-solution couplet quietly shelved—I started to read program documents closely to see how other programmers handled this problem. What I found was that they screened out refractory processes, delimiting a technical field as they headed resolutely toward a diagram in which problem A plus intervention B leads to C, a beneficial result. I do not see this kind of writing as dishonest: it is the requirement of the job. I have found it is not a job I can do well, not as a matter of personal idiosyncrasy, but because my training and field experiences have made me too alert to the problem of social reproduction. I just cannot make it go away. To come to this recognition, I have had to do as Bourdieu suggests—objectify my own formation as a subject of a particular kind, with a point of view that comes from an identifiable place.

Programs of intervention, in my experience, help some people and harm others, both outcomes routinely exceeding the plan. I admire the fortitude of people who continue to labor on revising plans with the aim of improving the ratio of benefits to costs, or redistributing them so that poor people gain a bit more or lose a bit less. On a larger canvas, however, these programs are not the only factor producing change. As development planners routinely acknowledge in their own reflective asides, change comes from the shifting alignment of social forces struggling over the process of social reproduction. Hence, in my book I examine programs of intervention genealogically to reveal their nonnecessary, contingent formation and place them in the context of social reproduction and political struggles. In taking this approach, I have given them no more—and no less—attention than they deserve.

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Tania Murray Li is professor and Canada Research Chair in the Department of Anthropology, University of Toronto, Canada. She writes on questions of land, livelihood, and development in Southeast Asia, especially Indonesia.

E-mail: tania.li@utoronto.ca.

Mailing address: Department of Anthropology, 19 Russell St, Toronto, ON, M5S2S2, Canada

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