

GRANTIA

IN TROUBLE AGAIN
A Special Issue of Travel Writing

20

WINTER 1986



GRANTA

LEONARD FRANK

THE

DEVELOPMENT

GAME



Development, as in Third World Development, is a debauched word, a whore of a word. Its users can't look you in the eye. Among biologists, the word means progress, the realization of an innate potential. The word is good, incontestable, a cause for celebration. In the mouths of politicians, economists and development experts like myself, it claims the same approval, but means nothing. There are no genes governing the shape of human society. No one can say of a society, as a gardener can of a flower, that it has become what it should be. It is an empty word which can be filled by any user to conceal any hidden intention, a Trojan horse of a word. It implies that what is done to people by those more powerful than themselves is their fate, their potential, their fault. A useful word, a bland word, a wicked word, a whore of a word. Development in the mouths of Americans has a lot in common with psychotherapy in the mouths of Russians.

No. This is nonsense. There is nothing sinister about 'development'. It is simply a useful word to describe the achievement of desirable goals: higher incomes, better nutrition and so on. There are no serious disagreements about what is desirable, and by repeated use the word has achieved a validity of shared understanding. That is all.

I'm happy. I'm alone. I am sitting on a balcony with my feet up, perfectly relaxed. My left arm grills in the sun; my right, in the shade, is still cold from the night. Up here, there is not enough air to filter the light from the sun nor enough to store its heat. I am crossed by a sharp diagonal shadow, happily divided. On a low table by my elbow is a pot of green tea, brought to me by a slavish servant. Next to it are papers and an unopened report. Beyond this rest-house are mountains: mountainsides, mountain valleys, mountain peaks, snow, high passes, the Himalayas, the roof of the world.

There are few perfect moments for a man like me, and now I shiver at the perfect moment. I am here, but not here. I am suspended between these mountain tops. I have arrived, but no one knows I have arrived. The officials have not been informed; the other mission members have not yet caught up. For a moment I am free.

‘You don’t want Botswana. You want Pakistan!’ The Korean man calling from Geneva had an explosive way of talking. ‘Pakistan. North-west Frontier. Beautiful place. Mountains. It’s a good place for a person like you. Famous place for you Westerners. The Great Game and all that. Never mind Botswana: you want Pakistan. Next week. Before the snows come. Very beautiful.’

It sounded like a good idea. There are so many development-aid people in Botswana you can’t find anything to finance any more. I asked about the Afghan war.

‘No, no. No war. Forget about the war. These people are very poor. Nobody has done anything for them. No development. They need development. You have to go before the snows.’

I don’t want to know about the war next door. They don’t want me to know. Or about the opium traffic. These are two things I don’t want to know too much about. And politics. I don’t want to know about politics either.

We are six on the mission to the North-west Frontier: an old Japanese, a Korean, an American, a Bangladeshi, a Dutch girl, me. I’m Canadian with a French mother. None of us have been here before. None of us have previously met. The Korean who brought us together does not know us either. He got my name from an Indian I once worked with in Manila and he phoned me at my Paris number.

How did the world get this way? It’s all quite rational but it’s too complicated to think about. OK: the Japanese, because Japanese money is becoming important; a Bangladeshi, because they are cheap and brown; a Korean, because the mission organiser is Korean; an American to punch statistics; a Dutch girl sociologist for the soft and warm. A mix of people because this time it’s an international agency. I’m in charge; I make the big decisions. We’ve got four weeks to come up with a project for, say, thirty million dollars. Routine.

This job is a question of damage limitation. Damage to yourself. You spend your time in places you don’t want to know with people you would not choose. I would not

choose them; they would not choose me. You get canny: you don’t notice anything you don’t need to notice; you schedule work so you can stay at international hotels. You keep the conversation bland. The American is a racist but I’m ignoring it. The younger Korean is upset because his marriage is failing, but I don’t want to know. People were not meant to go to a different country every month and live intimately with a group of strangers. When people and places change too much your mind can’t cope. You become confused and your memory goes. Once I proposed marriage to a woman in France, but by the time I had visited Venezuela, New Guinea and Zanzibar, I had forgotten.

There is something disturbing about the people in this valley: they look just like me. They are poor peasants, but they look just like me. They have fair complexions, rosy cheeks and straight noses. Some of them are blonde with blue eyes. I am used to my target group being browner. I saw two little blonde girls playing, and they could have been from California, except for their dirty faces. Perhaps the children have dirty faces because it rarely rains and the water from the melted snow is too cold for washing. There is no one I would ask about this.

Their dogs are just like ours. Cocker spaniels seem most popular. The people like to sit in garden chairs on the grass under the trees, and fondle their dogs. They grow apricots and apples. Apples! People in my projects grow mangoes, paw-paws, bananas, passion-fruit. They don’t grow apples. I suspect an elaborate joke is being played.

Tomorrow we go to another valley, the next day another. We are looking for valleys to develop.

The old Japanese is related to the emperor of Japan. My father managed a supermarket. Last night we shared a room. He snores. I found myself trying to trace the invisible hand which took him from his childhood and me from mine and brought us together on the North-west Frontier. I stopped myself. At breakfast we talked about golf courses in Japan, women in Manila and the relative merits of Intercontinental and Holiday Inn hotels.

These people are poor. Very poor. They may look like me but the truth is that they are very poor people. They scratch a living without enough land or water. They can't feed themselves. Every year the government distributes subsidized wheat at great expense, but many of them are too remote to be reached. The men have to leave their homes to look for work elsewhere. The ecology is collapsing. There are no longer enough trees to provide firewood for the long winters. Because the trees have been destroyed there are deadly mud-slides which bury villages, and floods which destroy the crops.

Three-and-a-half million Afghan refugees make the situation worse—but they are not our concern. The refugees are under separate administration and for us they hardly exist. We pass their camps and caravans, and the officials direct our attention elsewhere. The bases of mujahedin fighters do not exist for us at all. We are skilled at not seeing.

The peasants here sell nothing and buy little. There are no markets; they hardly deserve the name peasant. For half the year they are cut off by snow; for the other half transport is too expensive to be worthwhile. These people are wretched. Only the lightest and most valuable crops are worthy of investment. Opium poppies are ideal, but we have decided that, for us, opium poppies do not exist.

In summary, these people have a resource constraint, a market constraint, an infrastructure constraint and a technical possibility constraint. They are a suitable target group. Their appearance is deceptive.

OK, but if we define it as an opium-producing region the project will have to come under the US-assisted OEDD programme to co-ordinate it with other international funding for opium poppy substitution. If we do that, the terms of the US money mean we'll be stuck with a law enforcement component. And that means we'll have to channel funds through the NPSEB of the Federal Government. Bad news. Better to define the region as free of opium poppies and make the project part of the SDD without enforcement so we can by-pass the OEDD and locate it directly in the DCD of the PG. It will facilitate disbursement no end. Of course the Americans and

UNCAD will be pissed-off at not getting a piece of the action, but there's no shortage of co-financing agencies. Everyone wants a part of the North-west frontier these days.'

'Right.'

How did the world get this way? It's simple enough. Let me remember the story. Towards the end of the Second World War the rich countries, seeing a need for reconstruction in Europe and safeguards against economic instability, brought into being the International Monetary Fund and the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development—the World Bank. With the introduction of America's Marshall Plan for Europe, the World Bank was free to turn its attention to the poorest countries of the world. By providing scarce capital on favourable terms it permitted investment beyond the existing resources of these countries. Moreover the World Bank was able to provide the missing expertise. The success of these pioneering efforts led to a network of international development banks working under the World Bank's fatherly eye. Nowadays Third World nations can call upon a wide range of international and bilateral agencies to support them in their development efforts, and multinational missions of experienced 'development professionals' can be readily assembled in response to particular needs. There! Now I can sleep.

Except you could say—I've heard it said—that the World Bank is, in reality, an American organization, and its origins were not idealistic but opportunistic. It has loaned money to make the poorer countries import manufactured goods and export their raw materials. It has sought to tie the world to it with the intimate bond of debtor to creditor. It has insisted on projects designed by its own people to enforce its politics at the expense of local needs. It has made the great post-war political discovery: development finance is cheaper than colonialism but just as effective—the difference between a wonder-drug and gross surgery. We are the missionaries representing America's moment of vision, now far removed from us. Restless capital is seeking out the remotest Himalayan valleys, made interesting by heroin on New York streets, by the Russians across the border and by the need of a friendly dictatorship to survive an election. We are all foreigners,

but we are all Americans. None of us knows Pakistan but we all know what is good for it.

Now I can't sleep.

The truth is that money is simply the way of our world. We are the honest brokers who stand between the ignorant poor and the powerful rich. We control capital with careful planning; we guarantee that governments will not use aid for selfish or despotic ends. We stand in the path of an irresistible force and try to keep it decent.

Now please let me sleep.

'It's absolutely amazing. They are the most fantastic people. Do you know that their culture is tied up with the Persians and the Chinese? They don't really belong with the rest of Pakistan at all. You should talk to the people in the villages. They know exactly what they want. They are very well organized, very articulate. Sociologically it's amazing. The whole community is devoted to building these incredible irrigation works. Have you been up in the mountains to look at them? They build these stone channels high on the mountainsides—sometimes water has to travel five miles along sheer rock faces before it reaches a patch of soil. They could give Western engineers some lessons. And the social structure is completely intact and self-sufficient. All the labour is organized by the community and they make sure everyone shares the benefits. These people are geniuses! All the trees and livestock are managed on a community basis too. And have you seen how dignified they are? They smile because they don't feel belittled by the outside world yet. We have to be very careful here; they have something very valuable. We should go gently. Otherwise I can't agree with development here.'

I expect the Dutch girl's right. But where does it get us? The government wants to spend lots of money fast; the agency wants to lend it. She's naive. She burdens me. She does not understand the simplest fact of a bank's life: a return next year is worth having but a return in ten years' time isn't worth the trouble of calculation. Capital and care don't mix, and she had better decide who is paying her, the agency or the peasants.

I find the beauty sickening. I sit on the veranda with five companions not of my choosing. Some of them read reports, pretending to work. All of us have run out of safe things to say. In front of the veranda are mountain flowers, then the big river, then the mountains. If I look up, it's all snow-capped peaks, like meringue-topping. I don't want it. It's like a deceit, a sneer. The people are poor, the mountains a logistical nightmare. Everything is vertical instead of horizontal. Road building will cost twice the average. The sky here is an absurd blue, totally clear. It draws you up into it. Thank God we are returning to the Intercontinental in Peshawar tomorrow.

At least two people in the mission are mad. They have made the mistake of confusing what they say they are doing with what they are doing. The American carries his own computer around with him and is entering all the official statistics he can find. He wants to calculate the impact of all our possible investments in the region. The madness takes the form of obsessive scrupulousness about the data and analytical techniques. If two figures contradict each other—as they always do—he sweats over reconciling the difference and weighting the averages. He is trying to create a single economic model which will go from the daily milk consumption of migrant pastoralists in winter to the indirect macro-economic benefits of oil import substitution. His eyes are glued to his computer; it is impossible to get him to attend meetings any more. He only leaves his chair to go jogging, returning as dead-eyed and haggard as when he left. I tell him to relax. I tell him—exaggerating slightly—that half the statistics come from village clerks who made them up and the other half are manipulated by the government for policy purposes. And anyway, the figures don't matter very much. There will be a project: they want to borrow; we want to lend. His economic calculations will just be the window-dressing. It's politics, not economics, I tell him. At this he flies into a fury, standing up and knocking over his chair. He insists that he is a professional and that I should respect his expertise and integrity. I drop the subject. He's an experienced expert; I know that in the end he will convince himself that the convenient figures are the right ones.

The Korean is also mad. He is forty, has had half his stomach removed, drinks a bottle of whisky every night and compresses his leisure into intense bouts with the pornography he carries around with him. At home his wife has given up on him because he is never there. He fawns on the old Japanese who treats him like a servant, requiring him to prepare food and give massages in addition to his duties as an agriculturalist. His problem is that he genuinely likes the peasant farmers and, astonishingly, speaks enough Urdu to talk to them. This sympathy conflicts with his method of work, which is to start with what he thinks the peasants should be doing in ten years' time and work backwards. Each time he follows this line of thinking he discovers that the peasants would have to be forced to change their lives in ways they would not like. His inability to reconcile the idea of the peasants becoming Korean with the idea of them being happy sends him to the whisky, the pornography and, on one occasion, to my room at four in the morning. There he drunkenly asserted that he was a simple man, a peasant educated by accident, not like the aristocratic old Japanese whom he must respect but secretly disliked.

I've learned more about the Korean than any of the others. During the long night I came close to being involved in his emotions and caring about his problems. I only saw the danger with the coming of the dawn, when I understood it would be best to take a firm line and give him a deadline for his overdue report. After he left I felt dizzy, like a man walking on a cliff edge.

The old Japanese is not mad. His life is the game and he plays it well. The Dutch girl is not mad because she isn't in the game yet. I'm not mad; I know the rules.

'We are very interested in the mountain area. We want to do something for our people quickly. We don't want your six-year project; we want two years, three years. The people up there hardly know the government exists. They wonder what the government is doing for them. They see the refugees receiving all sorts of international aid and they wonder why they are not getting anything. It is a restless place. You should not think so small. We want to make an impact. You should join these people to the rest of Pakistan. You should be building tunnels through the mountains and making truckable roads right

up to the border areas. There are huge barren areas you could irrigate with large-scale irrigation schemes. Take our word for it. If you give us money we can do it. We can move people from the crowded areas to these new schemes. We can open up the region to new crops and industries. You are too timid. Agricultural research and improved farming are not enough. We want results. It's a priority area. The government is ready to move. We know what we have to do; you do not need to work it out in detail. Just release the money and we will do the rest.'

My head aches. We are back from the Himalayas. Do not disturb me in my Intercontinental room. I close the curtains. The hotel rooms in Pakistan have videos because there is nowhere to go. No bars, no night-clubs, no women. Not officially. The film is *On Golden Pond*, about a cranky old American played by Henry Fonda and a crusty old woman played by an actress whose name I used to know. Every month I learn the names of a hundred new people and a hundred new places and then forget them. Like a prostitute, I am a master of forgetting, but it's an inexact science. In the film I notice that, one, the couple have plenty of money; and, two, they've got a lot of time on their hands. I turn it off in favour of going through the pile of reports from which I will make my report.

In Peshawar they have blown up the PIA office, the railway station, the Khyber Mail Express, a bazaar, the Afghanistan office and the third best hotel—twice. At our hotel someone shot a white woman by the swimming pool, but I am told that the killing was religious not political. I ask my government guide whether the Intercontinental is likely to be blown up, us in it. For some reason he imagines me an ally and launches into a reckless analysis of the situation. The official line is that the Russian-backed Afghan government is responsible, even though on one occasion they seem to have bombed themselves. The imputed motive is that the bombings will stir up resentment among the Pakistan populace against the Afghan refugees, who are already disliked for taking over the most profitable businesses. If the refugees become unwelcome, Pakistan will no longer be able to support effectively the mujahedin fighters who mingle with them. My confidant is not convinced by this version. He tells me that he

is a supporter of Benazir Bhutto and a rapid return to democratic government. He believes that his own government is bombing itself to create a security crisis which will give it an excuse to continue martial law.

There are more complexities. He is very indiscreet. I've no idea whether he is right or wrong. Finally he notices my indifference and stops talking, embarrassed. I ask him again whether he thinks our hotel will be blown up. I tell him it is a management consideration. He replies that I need not worry, the bombers seem interested in killing only local people.

I don't like change but there is one new fact I must accept. Japan. The Japanese asks me quietly about vacant posts in international organizations. Can I help him place his men? He is sad about Japan's apologetic posture in the development world. The war is long over, but, although Japanese money is important, his country has not been given the influence to match its contribution. It is a humiliation. He wants to change things softly, softly. I encourage him and the inevitable. He has invited me to Japan, and I am ready to stop being American and to become Japanese. I'm tired of new places but I suppose I will go.

This Dutch girl is a nuisance. What are they doing sending a young woman to a Moslem country anyway? The officials do not listen to her, and her inexperience is a problem for the rest of us. For her it is an important discovery that the official world does not match the real one. She visits villages and reports back to us at dinner that the irrigation schemes are not working the way the government says they are, or that the veterinary employees are selling drugs they should give away. She tells us that money for building primary schools has gone into the pockets of contractors and local politicians. The official figures on truck transport are wrong because they neglect the Afghans who own most of the trucks. And so on. She's like a detective excited at uncovering a vast conspiracy. We make non-committal replies and try to change the subject. The older Japanese says nothing and finds an excuse to leave the table.

You have to make a choice about the world you live in—the real world or the official world. Nowadays I live in the official world. The real world is infinitely complex, and even the people

who are part of it don't understand it. And we are here for only four weeks, most of that in office meetings. When you discover that the official world does not correspond to the real world, you can either accept the official version or make your own judgement. It's always best to take the government figures. That way you save yourself work and don't tread on the toes of anyone who matters. We are here, after all, as guests.

'Look, we want to lend you the money you are talking about, but one valley is not enough. One valley doesn't have the absorption capacity. We need a minimum of two, and preferably three, valleys. We want at least a million people. Otherwise Geneva won't like it. Frankly, they will say it was not worth the expense of sending out a mission. We want to give you a project but you'll have to take away some valleys from someone else and give them to us.'

I spend my life in other people's offices. Here the officials are polite and intelligent, and invariably insist on tea and biscuits. In this case it's an administrator in the British mould—a cultured, literate generalist. I employ my usual technique of letting the man speak while I doodle in my notebook, pretending to note his views. We are getting along well when three French people are shown in to pick up their tourist authorizations. The occasional bombing of the border area by Russian MiGs had not inhibited the promotion of tourism by a government department not responsible for defence matters.

The two Frenchmen and one woman seem unduly taken aback by my presence and offer me a confusion of greetings. They look unlikely mountain trekkers: two of them, a middle-aged couple, are overweight, while the third is a fit young man. For French people on an expensive holiday, they are oddly un-chic. The woman's hair is poorly cut and her make-up is clumsy. All of them are cheaply dressed. They look away from me in order to avoid conversation; I'm convinced they are not French. While the official signs the papers and talks about snow leopards and the rare hawks to be found in the mountains, I examine their shoes. They look like Adidas and Nikes but in fact they are cheap imitations. Now I am convinced they are Russians posing as tourists; no wealthy Frenchman would wear imitation brands.

After they leave, the official returns to our conversation apologetically, explaining that he has been told to encourage tourism. I shrug and tell him I understand.

‘We have decided we can give you two more valleys. We will give you an American valley and one which was going to the Germans. We want to reduce bilateral funding in favour of international donors. But we have to have assurances that you will release the money fast.’

‘No problem. I’ll tell Geneva.’

Someone always gets sick on these trips. Foreign food, foreign bugs, unhealthy hotel life. Usually it’s the stress that does it. People were not meant to live this way. First it was the old Japanese with his aches and pains, now it’s the Bangladeshi. It will not be the American, who is too dry for any disease to take, and the Dutch girl has vitality on her side. I am saving myself and I doubt it will be me. The Bangladeshi has some sort of burning in his stomach and is vomiting all the time. Last week he told me he was homesick and missed his children. What could I say? Illness is an embarrassment to everyone and, in a way, unprofessional. We all have to work harder. If it gets serious it becomes a management problem. We’ll have to decide whether to evacuate him to the American hospital or send him home. Either way he doesn’t get paid and will probably not be hired again.

I’m tired of this mission. I don’t like Moslem countries: they make your life difficult. All over the world men are much the same: you can unwind with them in bars, talk about money and politics and women. Here they don’t drink in public and don’t admit to lust. The will of Allah suddenly comes into the middle of a business discussion. A meeting stops because it’s time for the Chief Secretary to pray. The whole place seems slightly out of focus. The same government which uses sophisticated economic analysis is also keen on cutting the hands off criminals and public floggings. You hardly see a woman on the streets and, when you do, she is covered from the top of her head to her toes. I caught myself trying to catch a glimpse of an ankle just to check whether the woman was young or old, fat or slim. Next month it’s the Gambia where the hotels are full of English women holidaymakers going topless.

‘OK, what we’ll do is this. We’ll keep the six-year concept but make a four-year first phase to satisfy the government. We’ll go for a small-farmer development package, with increased government staff and transport in the region, but we’ll include pre-feasibility studies for the large construction projects so they can’t say we ignored them. Logistically and socially the large-scale projects are bad news. We’ll include them in the total package but auction them off separately to co-financing agencies. There are plenty of development agencies who would be happy to pick them up. Pakistan is a success story, don’t forget: it can pay its debts. And this is the hottest region right now. We’ll put in a good-size road component, but we can’t touch the ecological problems—too long-term. We’ll put in something for research to cover our critics. And I want something on the soft and warm—an appendix on social factors. OK? We’re getting there. We’re in business.’

We’ve done the Himalayas, we’ve done the provincial government and we’ve cleared the federal government in Islamabad. After twenty-seven nights together, the mission has dispersed. The old Japanese and the American have taken the report to Geneva. The Korean has gone to Korea, the Dutch girl is staying on to do some research of her own. Research for research’s sake. The Bangladeshi was sent home four days early. I’ve shed them; I’m alone in the Karachi Sheraton. So tired. My job is over and I have five nights to kill before I need to be in Washington for a briefing on the Gambia mission. I try—not very hard—to remember the names of officials in Peshawar and I am pleased to find that already I cannot.

I take a long hot bath and wrap myself in an extravagance of towels. Then I take a walk around the hotel’s restaurants and cafés, looking at the foreign women without focusing my attention on any particular one. Probably I am smiling. I don’t need company; I’ve had enough of company. Back upstairs, I phone room service to order beer and something simple and Western to eat. They are showing *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* on the video and I settle back on the bed to watch. I have lots of pillows and the dinner tray on the bed next to me. I run a calculation through my mind to see how much I’ve earned, then I get lost in the film. Then I fall asleep.