

Title: The anti-politics machine: "development" and bureaucratic power in Lesotho

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"Development" projects in Lesotho have consistently failed to achieve their stated objects, not least because they are based on a "construction" of the country that bears little relation to prevailing realities. They do, however, succeed in expanding the field of bureaucratic state power in people's everyday lives. Recognition that this often unintended consequence of "development" is its main achievement argues for a new politics of opposition.

In the past two decades, Lesotho -- a small landlocked nation of about 1.8 million people surrounded by South Africa, with a current Gross National Product (GNP) of US\$816 million -- has received "development" assistance from 26 different countries, ranging from Australia, Cyprus and Ireland to Switzerland and Taiwan. Seventy-two international agencies and non- and quasi-governmental organizations, including CARE, Ford Foundation, the African Development Bank, the European Economic Community, the Overseas Development Institute, the International Labour Organization and the United Nations Development Programme, have also been actively involved in promoting a range of "development" programmes. In 1979, the country received some \$64 million in "official" development "assistance" -- about \$49 for every man, woman and child in the country. Expatriate consultants and "experts" swarm in the capital city of Maseru, churning out plans, programmes and, most of all, paper, at an astonishing rate.

As in most other countries, the history of "development" projects in Lesotho is one of "almost unremitting failure to achieve their objectives".(1) Nor does the country appear to be of especially great economic or strategic importance. What, then, is this massive and persistent internationalist intervention all about?

### Constructing a "Developer's" Lesotho

To "move the money" they have been charged with spending, "development" agencies prefer to opt for standardized "development" packages. It thus suits the agencies to portray developing countries in terms that make them suitable targets for such packages. It is not surprising, therefore, that the "country profiles" on which the agencies base their interventions frequently bear little or no relation to economic and social realities.

In 1975, for example, the World Bank issued a report on Lesotho that was subsequently used to justify a series of major Bank loans to the country. One passage in the report -- describing conditions in Lesotho at the time of its independence from Britain in 1966 -- encapsulates an image of Lesotho that fits well with the institutional needs of "development" agencies:

"Virtually untouched by modern economic development . . . Lesotho was, and still is, basically, a traditional subsistence peasant society. But rapid population growth resulting in extreme pressure on the land, deteriorating soil and declining agricultural yields led to a situation in which the country was no longer able to produce enough food for its people. Many able-bodied men were forced from the land in search of means to support their families, but the only employment opportunities [were] in neighbouring South Africa. At present, an estimated 60 per cent of the male labour force is away as migrant workers in South Africa . . . At independence, there was no economic infrastructure to speak of. Industries were virtually non-existent."(2)

## The Invention of "Isolation"

To a scholar of Lesotho, these assertions appear not only incorrect but outlandish. For one thing, the country has not been a "subsistence" society since at least the mid-1800s, having entered the twentieth century as a producer of "wheat, mealies, Kaffir corn [sic], wool, mohair, horses and cattle" for the South African market.(3) Nor were the local Basotho people isolated from the market. When they have had surpluses of crops or livestock, the people have always known how to go about selling them in local or regional markets. According to *The Oxford History of South Africa*:

"In 1837 the Sotho of Basutoland . . . had grain stored for four to eight years: in 1844 white farmers "flocked" to them to buy grain. During 1872 (after the loss of their most fertile land west of the Caledon) the Sotho exported 100,000 muids [185-lb bags] of grain . . . and in 1877 when the demand for grain on the diamond fields had fallen, 'large quantities' were held by producers and shopkeepers in Basutoland".(4)

Livestock auctions, meanwhile, have been held throughout the country since at least the 1950s, and animals from central Lesotho have been sold by the Basotho as far afield as South Africa for as long as anyone can remember. Far from being "untouched" by modern "development" at the time of independence, colonial rule had established a modern administration, airports, roads, schools, hospitals and markets for Western commodities.

The decline in agricultural surpluses, moreover, is neither recent nor, as the Bank suggests, due to "isolation" from the cash economy. More significant is the loss by the Basotho of most of their best agricultural land to encroaching Dutch settlers during a series of wars between 1840 and 1869. Nor is migration a recent response of a pristine and static "traditional" economy to "population pressure". As H. Ashton, the most eminent Western ethnographer of the Basuto, noted in 1952, "labour migration is . . . nearly as old as the Basuto's contact with Europeans"(5) -- indeed, throughout the colonial period to the present, Lesotho has served as a labour reservoir exporting wage workers to South African mines, farms and industry.

Large-scale labour migration, moreover, preceded the decline in agriculture by many years and may even have contributed to it. Even in years of very good crop production, from the 1870s on intermittently into the 1920s, workers left the country by the thousand for work. In the early stages, it seems, migration was not related to a need to make up for poor food production but to buy guns, clothing, cattle and other goods, and, from 1869, to pay taxes.

## Lesotho Reality

In fact, far from being the "traditional subsistence peasant society" described by the Bank, Lesotho comprises today what one writer describes as "a rural proletariat which scratches about on the land".(6)

Whilst the World Bank claims that "agriculture provides a livelihood for 85 per cent of the people",(7) the reality is that something in the order of 70 per cent of average rural household income is derived from wage labour in South Africa, while only six per cent comes from domestic crop production.(8) Similar myth-making pervades a joint FAO/World Bank report from 1975, which solemnly states that "about 70 per cent of [Lesotho's] GNP comes from the sale of pastoral products, mainly wool and mohair". A more conventional figure would be two or three per cent.(9)

Also false is the "development" literature's picture of Lesotho as a self-contained geographical entity whose relation with South Africa (its "rich neighbour") is one of accidental geographic juxtaposition rather than structural economic integration or political subordination, and whose poverty can be explained largely by the

dearth of natural resources within its boundaries, together with the incompleteness with which they have been "developed". If the country is resource-poor, this is because most of the good Sotho land was taken by South Africa. Saying, as USAID does in a 1978 report, that "poverty in Lesotho is primarily resource-related" is like saying that the South Bronx of New York City is poor because of its lack of natural resources and the fact that it contains more people than its land base can support.

### Rearranging Reality

A representation which acknowledged the extent of Lesotho's long-standing involvement in the "modern" capitalist economy of Southern Africa, however, would not provide a convincing justification for the "development" agencies to "introduce" roads, markets and credit. It would provide no grounds for believing that such "innovations" could bring about the "transformation" to a "developed", "modern" economy which would enable Lesotho's agricultural production to catch up with its burgeoning population and cut labour migration. Indeed, such a representation would tend to suggest that such measures for "opening up" the country and exposing it to the "cash economy" would have little impact, since Lesotho has not been isolated from the world economy for a very long time.

Acknowledging that Lesotho is a labour reserve for South African mining and industry rather than portraying it as an autonomous "national economy", moreover, would be to stress the importance of something which is inaccessible to a "development" planner in Lesotho. The World Bank mission to Lesotho is in no position to formulate programmes for changing or controlling the South African mining industry, and it has no disposition to involve itself in political challenges to the South African system of labour control. It is in an excellent position, however, to devise agricultural improvement projects, extension, credit and technical inputs, for the agriculture of Lesotho lies neatly within its jurisdiction, waiting to be "developed". For this reason, agricultural concerns tend to move centre stage and Lesotho is portrayed as a nation of "farmers", not wage labourers. At the same time, issues such as structural unemployment, influx control, low wages, political subjugation by South Africa, parasitic bureaucratic elites, and so on, simply disappear.

### Taking Politics out of "Development"

One striking feature of the "development" discourse on Lesotho is the way in which the "development" agencies present the country's economy and society as lying within the control of a neutral, unitary and effective national government, and thus almost perfectly responsive to the blueprints of planners. The state is seen as an impartial instrument for implementing plans and the government as a machine for providing social services and engineering growth.

"Development" is, moreover, seen as something that only comes about through government action; and lack of "development", by definition, is the result of government neglect. Thus, in the World Bank's view, whether Lesotho's GNP goes up or down is a simple function of the current five-year "development" plan being well-implemented or badly-implemented: it has nothing to do with whether or not the mineworkers who work in South Africa get a raise in any particular year. Agricultural production, similarly, is held to be low because of the "absence of agricultural development schemes" and, thus, local ignorance that "worthwhile things could be achieved on their land". In this way, an extraordinarily important place is reserved for policy and "development" planning.(10)

Excluded from the Bank's analysis are the political character of the state and its class basis, the uses of official positions and state power by the bureaucratic elite and other individuals, cliques and factions, and the advantages to them of bureaucratic "inefficiency" and corruption. The state represents "the people", and mention of the undemocratic nature of the ruling government or of political opposition is studiously avoided.

The state is taken to have no interests except "development": where "bureaucracy" is seen as a problem, it is not a political matter, but the unfortunate result of poor organization or lack of training.

Political parties almost never appear in the discourse of the Bank and other "development" institutions, and the explicitly political role played by "development" institutions such as Village Development Committees (VDCs), which often serve as channels for the ruling Basotho National Party (BNP), is ignored or concealed. "The people" tend to appear as an undifferentiated mass, a collection of "individual farmers" and "decision makers", a concept which reduces political and structural causes of poverty to the level of individual "values", "attitudes" and "motivation". In this perspective, structural change is simply a matter of "educating" people, or even just convincing them to change their minds. When a project is sent out to "develop the farmers" and finds that "the farmers" are not much interested in farming, and, in fact, do not even consider themselves to be "farmers", it is thus easy for it to arrive at the conclusion that "the people" are mistaken, that they really are farmers and that they need only to be convinced that this is so for it to be so.

In fact, neither state bureaucracies nor the "development" projects associated with them are impartial, apolitical machines which exist only to provide social services and promote economic growth. In the case of the Canadian- and World Bank-supported Thaba-Tseka Development Project, an agricultural programme in Lesotho's central mountains, Sesotho-language documents distributed to villagers were found to have slogans of the ruling Basotho National Party (BNP) added at the end, although these did not appear in any of the English language versions. Public village meetings conducted by project staff were peppered with political speeches, and often included addresses by a high-ranking police officer on the "security threat" posed by the opposition Basutoland Congress Party. Any money remaining after project costs had been repaid went to the BNP's Village Development Committees -- leading one villager to note caustically, "It seems that politics is nowadays nicknamed 'development'."

Tellingly, when I interviewed the Canadian Coordinator of the Thaba-Tseka Project in 1983, he expressed what appeared to be a genuine ignorance of the political role played by VDCs. The project hired labour through the committees, he stated, because the government had told them to. "We can't afford to get involved with politics," he said. "If they say 'hire through the Committees,' I do it."

It seems likely that such apparent political naivete is not a ruse, but simply a low-level manifestation of the refusal to face local politics which, for institutional reasons, characterizes the entire "development" apparatus.

### Inevitable Failure

Because the picture of Lesotho constructed by the Bank and other "development" agencies bears so little resemblance to reality, it is hardly surprising that most "development" projects have "failed" even on their own terms. Thus after years of accusing local people of being "defeatist" or "not serious" about agriculture, and even implying that wage increases at South African mines were "a threat" to the determination of farmers to become "serious", Thaba-Tseka project experts had to concede that local people were right that little beside maize for local consumption was going to come out of their tiny mountain fields, and that greater investment in agriculture was not going to pay handsome rewards.(11)

Casting themselves in the role of politically-neutral artisans using "development" projects as tools to grab hold of and transform a portion of the country according to a pre-determined plan, "development" officials assumed that the projects were givens and all they had to do was "implement" them.

In the case of the Thaba-Tseka project, for example, planners assumed that it would be a relatively simple matter to devolve much of the decision-making to a newly constituted Thaba-Tseka district, in order to

increase efficiency, enable the project to be in closer touch with the needs of "the people" and avoid the its becoming entangled in government bureaucracy. But what the planners assumed would be a simple technical reform led -- predictably -- to a whole range of actors using the reforms for their own ends.

The project's Health Division, for example, was partly appropriated as a political resource for the ruling National Party. Power struggles broke out over the use of project vehicles. Government ministries refused to vote funds to the project and persisted in maintaining their own control over their field staff and making unilateral decisions on actions in the district. An attempt to hire a Mosotho to replace the project's expatriate Canadian director was rejected, since as long as the programme's image remained "Canadian", there could be no danger of bringing about a real "decentralization" of power away from Maseru, Lesotho's capital.

Instead of being a tool used by artisans to resculpt society, in short, the project was itself worked on: it became like a bread crumb thrown into an ant's nest. Plans for decentralization were thus abandoned in 1982. Yet Thaba-Tseka's planners continued to insist that the project's failure resulted somehow from the government's failure to understand the plan, or from the right organizational chart not having been found. Needing to construe their role as "apolitical", they continued to see government as a machine for delivering services, not as a political fact or a means by which certain classes and interests attempted to control the behaviour and choices of others.

#### A Different Kind of Property

Another example of "failure" stemming from the "development" discourse's false construction of Lesotho is that of livestock "development".

"Development" planners have long seen Lesotho's grasslands as one of the few potentially exploitable natural resources the country possesses,(12) and the country's herds of domestic grazing animals as an inertia-ridden "traditional" sector ripe for transformation by the dynamic "modern" cash economy. What is required, according to planners, is to develop "appropriate marketing outlets", control grassland use to optimize commercial productivity through destocking and grazing associations, introduce improved breeds, and convince "farmers to market their non-productive stock".(13)

Far from being the result of "traditional" inertia, however, the Basotho's reluctance to treat livestock commercially is deeply embedded in, and partly maintained by, a modern, capitalist labour reserve economy. In Lesotho's highly-monetized economy, an item such as a transistor radio or a bar of soap may be subject to the same market mechanisms of pricing, supply and demand as it is anywhere else. Cattle, goats and sheep, however, are subject to very different sorts of rules. Although cash can always be converted into livestock through purchase, there is a reluctance to convert grazing animals to cash through sale, except when there is all emergency need for food, clothes, or school fees.

This practice is rooted in, and reinforced by, a social system in which young working men are away in South Africa supporting their families for ten or eleven months of the year. (Mines hire only men, and it is very difficult for women from Lesotho to find work in South Africa.) If a man comes home from the mines with cash in his pocket, his wife may present him with a demand to buy her a new dress, furniture for the house or new blankets for the children. If, on the other hand, he comes home with an ox purchased with his wages, it is more difficult to make such demands.

One reason that men like to own large numbers of livestock is that they boost their prestige and personal networks in the community, partly since they can be farmed out to friends and relatives to help with their field work. They thus serve as a "placeholder" for the man in the household and the community, symbolically

asserting his structural presence and prestigious social position, even in the face of his physical absence. After he has returned to the household because of injury, age or being laid off from the South African mines to "scratch about on the land", livestock begin to be sold in response to absolute shortages of minimum basic necessities. Grazing animals thus constitute a sort of special "retirement fund" for men which is effective precisely because, although it lies within the household, it cannot be accessed in the way cash can.

Hence a whole mystique has grown up glorifying cattle ownership -- a mystique which, although largely contested by women, is constantly fought for by most men. Such conflict is not a sign of disintegration or crisis; it is part of the process of recreating a "tradition" which is never simply a residue of the past. If the cultural rules governing livestock in Lesotho persist, it is because they are made to persist; continuity as much as change has to be created and fought for.

Investment in livestock is thus not an alternative to migrant labour but a consequence of it. If livestock sellers surveyed by "development" experts report no source of income other than agriculture, this does not mean that they are "serious stock farmers" as opposed to "migrant labourers"; they may simply be "retired".

However useful and necessary they may be, moreover, livestock in Lesotho is less an "industry" or a "sector" than a type (however special) of consumer good bought with wages earned in South Africa when times are good and sold off only when times are bad. The sale of an animal is not "off-take" of a surplus, but part of a process which culminates in the destruction of the herd. A drop in livestock exports from Lesotho is thus not, as the "development" discourse would have it, a sign of a depressed "industry", but of a rise in incomes. For instance, when wages were increased in South African mines in the 1970s. Basotho miners seized the opportunity to invest in cattle in unprecedented numbers, leading to a surge in import figures from 4,067 in 1973 to 57,787 in 1978. Over the same period, meanwhile, cattle export figures dropped from 12,894 to 574. A boom in exports, on the other hand, would be the mark of a disaster.

Not surprisingly, attempts to "modernize" Lesotho's "livestock sector" have met with resistance. Within one year of the Thaba-Tseka project attempting to fence off 15 square kilometres of rangeland for the exclusive use of "progressive", "commercially-minded" farmers, for example, the fence had been cut or knocked down in many places, the gates stolen, and the area was being freely grazed by all. The office of the association manager had been burned down, and the Canadian officer in charge of the programme was said to be fearing for his life.

This resistance was rooted in more than a general suspicion of the government and the "development" project. To join the official "grazing association" permitted to use the fenced-in land, stock owners were required to sell off many poor animals to buy improved ones, ending up with perhaps half as many. Such sales and restrictions in herd size were not appealing for most Basotho men. Joining the association not only meant accepting selection, culling and marketing of herds. It also meant acquiescing in the enclosure of both common grazing land and (insofar as any Mosotho's livestock are also a social, shared domain of wealth) animals. It thus signified a betrayal of fellow stock-owners who remained outside the organization, an act considered anti-social. Prospective association members also probably feared that their animals -- which represent wealth in a visible, exposed, and highly vulnerable form -- might be stolen or vandalized in retaliation.

### The Side Effects of "Failure"

Despite such disasters, it may be that what is most important about a "development" project is not so much what it fails to do but what it achieves through its "side effects". Rather than repeatedly asking the politically naive question "Can aid programmes ever be made really to help poor people?", perhaps we should

investigate the more searching question, "What do aid programmes do besides fail to help poor people?"

Leftist political economists have often argued that the "real" purpose of "development" projects is to aid capitalist penetration into Third World countries. In Lesotho, however, such projects do not characteristically succeed in introducing new relations of production (capitalist or otherwise), nor do they bring about modernization or significant economic transformations. Nor are they set up in such a way that they ever could. For this reason, it seems a mistake to interpret them simply as "part of the historical expansion of capitalism" or as elements in a global strategy for controlling or capitalizing peasant production.

Capitalist interests, moreover, can only operate through a set of social and cultural structures so complex that the outcome may be only a baroque and unrecognizable transformation of the original intention. Although it is relevant to know, for instance, that the World Bank has an interest in boosting production and export of cash crops for the external market, and that industrialized states without historic links to an area may sponsor "development" projects as a way of breaking into otherwise inaccessible markets, it remains impossible simply to read off actual events from these known interests as if the one were a simple effect of the other. Merely knowing that the Canadian government has an interest in promoting rural "development" because it helps Canadian corporations to find export markets for farm machinery, for example, leaves many of the empirical details of the Canadian role in Thaba-Tseka absolutely mysterious.

Another look at the Thaba-Tseka project, however, reveals that, although the project "failed" both at poverty alleviation and at extending the influence of international capital, it did have a powerful and far-reaching impact on its region. While the project did not transform livestock-keeping, it did build a road to link Thaba-Tseka more strongly with the capital. While it did not bring about "decentralization" or "popular participation", it was instrumental in establishing a new district administration and giving the government a much stronger presence in the area than it had ever had before.

As a direct result of the construction of the project centre and the decision to make that centre the capital of a new district, there appeared a new post office, a police station, a prison and an immigration control office; there were health officials and nutrition officers and a new "food for work" administration run by the Ministry of Rural Development and the Ministry of Interior, which functioned politically to regulate the power of chiefs. The new district centre also provided a good base for the "Para-Military Unit", Lesotho's army, and near the project's end in 1983, substantial numbers of armed troops began to be garrisoned at Thaba-Tseka.

In this perspective, the "development" apparatus in Lesotho is not a machine for eliminating poverty that is incidentally involved with the state bureaucracy. Rather, it is a machine for reinforcing and expanding the exercise of bureaucratic state power, which incidentally takes "poverty" as its point of entry and justification -- launching an intervention that may have no effect on the poverty but does have other concrete effects.

This does not mean that "the state", conceived as a unitary entity, "has" more power to extract surplus, implement programmes, or order around "the masses" more efficiently -- indeed, the reverse may be true. It is, rather, that more power relations are referred through state channels and bureaucratic circuits -- most immediately, that more people must stand in line and await rubber stamps to get what they want. "It is the same story over again," said one "development" worker. "When the Americans and the Danes and the Canadians leave, the villagers will continue their marginal farming practices and wait for the mine wages, knowing only that now the taxman lives down the valley rather than in Maseru."(14)

At the same time, a "development" project can effectively squash political challenges to the system not only through enhancing administrative power, but also by casting political questions of land, resources, jobs or

wages as technical "problems" responsive to the technical "development" intervention. If the effects of a "development" project end up forming any kind of strategically coherent or intelligible whole, it is as a kind of "anti-politics" machine, which, on the model of the "anti-gravity" machine of science fiction stories, seems to suspend "politics" from even the most sensitive political operations at the flick of a switch.

Such a result may be no part of the planners' intentions. It is not necessarily the consequence of any kind of conspiracy to aid capitalist exploitation by incorporating new territories into the world system or working against radical social change, or bribing national elites, or mystifying the real international relationships. The result can be accomplished, as it were, behind the backs of the most sincere participants. It may just happen to be the way things work out. On this view, the planning apparatus is neither mere ornament nor the master key to understanding what happens. Rather than being the blueprint for a machine, it is a part of the machine.

### What Is To Be Done? By Whom?

If, then, "development" cannot be the answer to poverty and powerlessness in Lesotho, what is? What is to be done, if it is not "development"?

Any question of the form "What is to be done?" demands first of all an answer to the question "By whom?" The "development" discourse, and a great deal of policy science, tends to answer this question in a utopian way by saying "Given an all-powerful and benevolent policy-making apparatus, what should it do to advance the interests of its poor citizens?"

This question is worse than meaningless. In practice, it acts to disguise what are, in fact, highly partial and interested interventions as universal, disinterested and inherently benevolent. If the question "What is to be done?" has any sense, it is as a real-world lactic, not a utopian ethics.

The question is often put in the form "What should they do?", with the "they" being not very helpfully specified as "Lesotho" or "the Basotho". When "developers" speak of such a collectivity what they mean is usually the government. But the government of Lesotho is not identical with the people who live in Lesotho, nor is it in any of the established senses "representative" of that collectivity. As in most countries, the government is a relatively small clique with narrow interests. There is little point in asking what such entrenched and often extractive elites should do in order to empower the poor. Their own structural position makes it clear that they would be the last ones to undertake such a project.

Perhaps the "they" in "What should they do?" means "the people". But again, the people are not an undifferentiated mass. There is not one question -- What is to be done? -- but hundreds: What should the mineworkers do? What should the abandoned old women do? and so on. It seems presumptuous to offer prescriptions here. Toiling miners and abandoned old women know the tactics proper to their situations far better than any expert does. If there is advice to be given about what "they" should do, it will not be dictating general political strategy or giving a general answer to the question "what is to be done?" (which can only be determined by those doing the resisting) but answering specific, localized, tactical questions.

### What Should We Do?

If the question is, on the other hand, "What should we do?", it has to be specified, which "we"? If "we" means "development" agencies or governments of the West, the implied subject of the question falsely implies a collective project for bringing about the empowerment of the poor. Whatever good or ill may be accomplished by these agencies, nothing about their general mode of operation would justify a belief in such a collective "we" defined by a political programme of empowerment.

For some Westerners, there is, however, a more productive way of posing the question "What should we do?". That is, "What should we intellectuals working in or concerned about the Third World do?" To the extent that there are common political values and a real "we" group, this becomes a real question. The answer, however, is more difficult.

Should those with specialized knowledge provide advice to "development" agencies who seem hungry for it and ready to act on it? As I have tried to show, these agencies seek only the kind of advice they can take. One "developer" asked my advice on what his country could do "to help these people". When I suggested that his government might contemplate sanctions against apartheid, he replied, with predictable irritation, "No, no! I mean development!" The only advice accepted is about how to "do development" better. There is a ready ear for criticisms of "bad development projects", only so long as these are followed up with calls for "good development projects". Yet the agencies who plan and implement such projects -- agencies like the World Bank, USAID, and the government of Lesotho -- are not really the sort of social actors that are very likely to advance the empowerment of the poor.

Such an obvious conclusion makes many uncomfortable. It seems to them to imply hopelessness; as if to suggest that the answer to the question "What is to be done?" is: "Nothing." Yet this conclusion does not follow. The state is not the only game in town, and the choice is not between "getting one's hands dirty by participating in or trying to reform development projects" and "living in an ivory tower". Change comes when, as Michel Foucault says, "critique has been played out in the real, not when reformers have realized their ideas".(15)

For Westerners, one of the most important forms of engagement is simply the political participation in one's own society that is appropriate to any citizen. This is, perhaps, particularly true for citizens of a country like the US, where one of the most important jobs for "experts" is combating imperialist policies.

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