



Social Anthropology and Consultancy

Author(s): Kevin O'Sullivan

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Lesbian and heterosexual supporters and their children demonstrate in San Francisco for the right of lesbian mothers to maintain custody of their children: from Deborah Goleman Wolf's *The Lesbian Community*.

Such a suggestion is unlikely to shock anthropologists; nor would it be likely to surprise the citizens of San Francisco, where some two-thirds of the adult population of 600,000 are single and the homosexual voting bloc is estimated at up to 200,000. Although demographic implications are not explored in a new, well-researched study of San Francisco lesbian-feminism by Dr Deborah Goleman Wolf, they provide one reason among others for reading her *The Lesbian Community*.²

Dr Wolf is married, a mother and heterosexual; and her book (which first appeared in the form of a Ph.D. dissertation for the anthropology department at Berkeley) obeys classical principles of observer participation. Perhaps she presents an over-sympathetic picture of her subjects, but this is evidently a conscious decision by Dr Wolf to counteract the negative stereotypes of 'dykes', who are undoubtedly a stigmatized and neglected minority. As an anthropologist should, Dr Wolf helps us see the world with the eyes of her subjects: her book is disturbing.

Out of an estimated total of 35,000 lesbians in San Francisco, Dr Wolf confines her attention to militant groups who have discarded not only the 'old gay life' which centred round bars, but also the self-help organizations which grew up in the late 1950's. As with other stigmatized minorities in the USA, activist lesbians not only assert their dignity but also set up as social reformers in a wider context. The groups studied by Dr Wolf identify maleness with everything they reject: acquisitiveness, careerism, the nuclear family.

They discard out of hand the psychological theory that homosexuality represents a stage of immaturity or arrested emotional development. Their relationship with male homosexual groups is shifting and uneasy; and so is their relationship with women's lib groups, whom they attempt to recruit to their cause with the logic that if men are oppressors, women should have as little to do with them as possible. All these tensions crystallize with the problem of the lesbian mother.

The monomania of proselytizing lesbianism probably drives many individual converts to backslide towards the enemy; but the net effect on the wider society will surely be one of increased tolerance.

There is no evidence that San Francisco has been selected — whether by nature or human design — as an experi-

mental station for reducing the U.S. birth-rate so as to maintain living standards. Meanwhile, some major countries such as France actually perceive themselves as underpopulated (the present French government's policy is to increase the birth-rate while encouraging harmonious development of the family³); so it is unlikely for the time being that anti-natalist measures other than those already familiar will become common.

Jonathan Benthall

1. 81:1, March 1979.
2. University of California Press, £6.95.
3. 'A society which is no longer capable of ensuring the replacement of generations, that is to say whose manpower is diminishing, is a society that is condemned'. V. Giscard d'Estaing, 14 December 1978, reported in *Le Monde*, 15 December.

SOCIAL ANTHROPOLOGY AND CONSULTANCY

The author is a social anthropology graduate who is now a senior partner in a London firm of consulting engineers, T. P. O'Sullivan and Partners. His article, part of a paper delivered at the University of Kent in May, is designed to explain how the consultancy business operates, with special reference to the possible contribution of anthropologists.

Twenty-five years ago, the consultancy business, if we confine ourselves to established firms providing professional services, consisted in the main of a large number of architect and engineering firms and a small number of management consultants. It was in Britain and the USA that these professions developed their characteristic form of the independent professional partnership (constituted on the model of the legal or accounting firm) employing all the technical and administrative staff and owning most of the technical equipment necessary to carry out their functions. In continental countries and Japan and Latin America the professional expertise required to carry out a project was either provided from within the staff of the relevant government organisations, or from a University, or by eminent individuals who set up in practice on their own.

During the last twenty-five years there have been certain major developments in the market for consultancy work which have led to major changes in the structure of the business. One of the main developments has been the strengthening of the relative position of consulting engineers within the consulting scene as a whole. It is not obvious why this should have happened. A probable cause is that architects are not very interested in management and are individualistic: firms have a tendency to split up under the pressure of intellectual or aesthetic disagreements between the partners. Management consultants on the other hand, suffer under the disadvantage of not having a concrete product to sell. Belief in their efficacy, and the value of

the high fee they charge, owes more to trust than does belief in the efficiency of the engineer's skill when he points to the bridge or the dam he has designed. Of the three main consultancy groups this left only the engineers, who didn't go in much for aesthetic disagreements, had an obvious product to show, and who were quite good at managing because, after all, they did have to make sure that the bridges got built.

The other major development was a shift in the balance of the market in favour of work in Less Developed Countries, due to (a) a tendency for industrialised countries' bureaucracies to grow so as to absorb the function of engineers and architects (though not management consultants who enjoyed a boom in the 1960's and early 70's, in Europe and the US): this meant that work that had come to consulting engineers or architects was now done in-house by the big public sector spenders such as local authorities, road construction units and utilities undertakings; and (b) the steadily growing amount of loan capital, aid and technical assistance made available to developing countries by the industrialist countries either bilaterally or through multilateral agencies such as the World Bank and the UN. All this funding of development projects brought with it a vastly increased market for those who knew how to plan, design and construct the large capital projects on which the loan and aid money was spent. This new market stimulated the formation of new consulting firms in continental Europe, Japan, Australia and Latin America, so that what was originally an Anglo-Saxon institution, the independent professional agency, has now spread much more widely. Finally, and as an aspect of this trend, the work of consultants became more broadly based: economists, agriculturists, social scientists, accountants, systems analysts, entered the field as aid projects became

steadily more complex.

From all these developments, the consulting engineers were the main beneficiaries. Equipped initially to deal with the largest capital investment projects, such as ports, dams and railways, they developed their skills into the 'softer' discipline of planning and management as aid donors became concerned to do more than simply provide the hardware. Other consultants also took on an interdisciplinary aspect. Architects acquired capability in planning, engineering and sociology; management consultants went into economics, psychology, systems analysis, process engineering. However, with a few notable exceptions the dominant consulting firms in the world in terms of size and range of capability are consulting engineers. It is to such firms that the major lending agencies and aid donors tend to look first when seeking technical expertise to plan, appraise, or implement a development project.

A typical consulting firm operating internationally will be owned and controlled by its working partners or directors, will have a strong preponderance of engineers among its personnel, will be between 20 and 2000 (though probably between 80 and 800) strong, and will number among its staff (or retained consultants) economists, urban and regional planners, architects, systems analysts, perhaps agriculturalists, accountants and even a social anthropologist or two.

The first consulting engineers were British. They set up their offices in Victoria Street in the second half of the nineteenth century and designed and supervised the construction of the infrastructure of high Victorian Britain, the barrages and bridges of British India, and most of the railways of South America. Among their greatest social achievements was the installation of urban drainage and sewerage, which did more for public health than the entire medical profession until the arrival of antibiotics.

In the 1940's, 50's and 60's, as the colonies became independent, there were plenty of engineers looking for work who had good experience of practical low-cost engineering in developing countries and who wanted to continue a career abroad. Many of them found their way into consulting firms, so that these firms became a reservoir of the kind of expertise required by the aid agencies when they started their project development work at about the same time. The British also seem to be rather good at working effectively in small groups under difficult conditions, which is a requirement for successful consulting work in developing countries. Our continental competitors would add that we have two further qualifications for market success: we're cheap and we all speak English.

Moving closer to the 'typical consulting firm' let us look at an example. The firm I have in mind employs 160 professional staff, 40 technicians and draftsmen, and 30 purely administrative staff. It is working at present in 15 countries.

Its annual turnover of fees and expenses is about £4m., of which about 85% comes from its work in developing countries. It works for most of the big loan and aid agencies. It is divided into six operational divisions and a number of headquarter divisions dealing with finance, administration, technical support, computing, etc. The operational Divisions cover the following fields:

- * Technical assistance and institution-building;
- * Transportation and geotechnical engineering;
- * Water engineering: drainage, sewerage, water supply;
- * Agricultural development;
- * Urban development;
- * Economic and management studies.

Work in hand ranges from a project to introduce new seed varieties in Pakistan, to low-cost labour-intensive road construction in Honduras, and the planning of low-cost housing in Mali. In all of those projects there is, or could be, a place for an anthropologist.

Another example is the firm of which I am a partner. Its main fields of work (although it does other things as well) are transport planning, road and bridge engineering, and low-cost housing. It tends to do more planning and advisory work than detailed design or construction supervision. It has five partners and about fifty staff. We are working in ten countries at present. Anthropologists are engaged as consultants in Chad and Tanzania in both cases to assess the possibility of building village access roads using locally organized labour. Like the larger firm, we work for most of the aid and lending agencies: the World Bank and the Ministry of Overseas Development; the various regional Development Banks such as the Asian Development Bank and the Africa Development Bank; the European Development Fund, which is the Common Market's aid agency; and for various of the UN agencies, particularly the United Nations Development Programme. Work in hand includes planning cyclone protection measures in Sri Lanka, rehabilitating the roads of Jamaica, training engineers in Bangladesh, and assisting with low-cost housing programmes in the Philippines.

It is with such firms that anthropologists have in the past – and will increasingly, I believe, in the future – find work in project preparation, appraisal

and monitoring. These firms will offer this work because their clients are coming to require it. A good example of such a consulting assignment would be my own firm's use of an anthropologist in our work in Chad. The task is to appraise the rural transport requirements of Chad, to devise a ten-year strategy for the development of rural transport, and a four-year construction programme for high-priority rural roads. Since Chad is a very large country with a very small population and has one of the lowest levels of per capita income in the world, the whole thing is an exercise in shoe-string engineering. It is not at all clear that a rural road network is a viable option for Chad and it may be better to rely on improving camel transport, or providing a limited number of four-wheel-drive cross-country vehicles on a certain quota per village. The economics are appalling when you get down to them, and yet so are the human consequences of leaving Chad in its present situation of being unable to communicate with itself when the next Sahelian drought comes around.

The six-man team carrying out this study will consist of two highway engineers, a transport economist, an agricultural economist, a rural engineer (that is, an expert in such things as boreholes, grain storage structures and other aspects of agricultural technology) and a social anthropologist. The anthropologist's role will be critical, since he will advise the team on whether the local population can be mobilised to build and maintain earth roads under supervision, using a minimum of plant and equipment. It is on whether or not the roads can be built using locally organized labour that the feasibility of the entire programme is likely to hang. The engineers will work on ways and means of building viable roads at the lowest possible cost and will draw up detailed specifications and estimates for their construction; the economist will establish the priorities for road construction under prevailing economic conditions; the anthropologist will interpret the local socio-economic environment to his colleagues so that the investments in roads and other aspects of rural infrastructure are consonant with the aims of the local people and likely to lead to their own participation in the development process.

Kevin O'Sullivan

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