Festival Elephants and the Myths of Global Poverty

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Festival Elephants, by Glynn Cochrane, is a critique of the excesses and inefficiencies of the global aid industry from the viewpoint of a development anthropologist. This book is part of Pearson Education’s Anthropology Works series and serves as an introductory text for undergraduates in applied anthropology, international development, or global studies courses. In this book, Cochrane offers an intimate look at the global aid industry drawing on more than 40 years of experience as an anthropologist working for the British Overseas Civil Service, World Bank, United Nations Development Program (UNDP), and the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID). Through a series of case studies, he argues that the global aid industry has become a self-serving industry whose primary interest is in its own sustainability. The text reads as an institutional ethnography. It relies on the author’s experiences to examine the structures, relationships, and institutional values that guide the actions of aid organizations.

The first two chapters of the book outline Cochrane’s critique and present the metaphor of festival elephants. The book’s title uses Sri Lankan festival elephants to represent what Cochrane sees as a largely ineffective and ostentatious global aid industry.

They [festival elephants] promise to entertain by providing ever more dazzling acts, which everyone would like to see but which, at some point, the elephants cannot perform. Unfortunately, the festival elephants think that promising is the same thing as performing (p. 12).

Cochrane’s central criticism is aimed at the mismanagement of resources by aid organizations and government agencies—festival elephants. He contends that the aid industry has generated a myth of global poverty that suits its own purposes but does not accurately reflect the realities on the ground. The myths of global poverty have become too universal and monolithic for development efforts to address local problems. Cochrane suggests that a more effective approach to eliminating poverty would be for worker elephants to replace festival elephants to deliver aid resources directly to the poor.

Case studies from Sri Lanka, the Solomon Islands, New Guinea, Polynesia, and Tanzania illustrate Cochrane’s critique of the global aid industry. Cochrane provides an insider’s view on the process of development based on his firsthand knowledge. He demonstrates how the aid industry has in some instances contributed to the problem of global poverty rather than offered any lasting solutions. He highlights the importance of cultural knowledge and the many opportunities for anthropologists to play a valuable role in facilitating effective development. This includes the collection and interpretation of local cultural knowledge for outsiders, helping to build positive social relationships between local populations and outside aid organizations, and facilitating partnerships between local leaders and aid organizations for the purposes of designing and implementing projects.

Despite its many strengths, Festival Elephants would be a difficult book to recommend to anthropology undergraduates without some reservation. Despite its 2008 publication date, this book already feels outdated. Its most recent case studies are from the late 1990s and little attention is given to contemporary responses to global problems such as climate change or the HIV/AIDS epidemic. Substantial portions of the text describe Cochrane’s work in the British Overseas Civil Service during the 1960s as a colonial administrator stationed in the Western Pacific. Although the author clearly states he does not support a return to colonialism, he contends that “there are lessons about poverty alleviation that can be learned from British colonialism and from mining” (p. 171). These lessons have to do with the application of anthropology by colonial Britain to understand cultural
systems for the purposes of designing and delivering development assistance. Despite this uncomfortable statement, Cochrane’s description of his work in the Solomon Islands offers an extremely fascinating account about the life and responsibilities of British social anthropologists during colonial rule.

Overall, *Festival Elephants* challenges students to think critically about common stereotypes about poverty and by examining culture and history. The author concludes by calling for a downsizing of global aid agencies and a complete change in institutional culture. However, the book does not offer much that is new to the debate on poverty alleviation or in offering a more critical look at global poverty. It also tends to focus on large agencies, such as the World Bank or USAID, while ignoring much of the community-based development accomplished by smaller non-governmental organizations.

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