John Clammer

John Clammer has a comprehensive and deep understanding of the complexity of development work, which is visibly translated into this book. His objective is to look critically and holistically at ‘Development Studies’, while placing culture at the heart of development.

He divided the book into three parts. Part I, on culture and development, gives an overview of the current state of play in development discourse and the role of culture. Part II expands the boundaries of development discourse with two perspectives: reframing social economics, and culture and climate justice. In Part III, he delves into the issues of development, culture and human existence, the aesthetics of development, and social movements and social transformations.

He starts by arguing that development studies have been inefficient in dealing with the issues that afflict the planet, such as conflict, environmental pressures and the increasing rise of inequalities. Moreover, Clammer summarises the criticism ‘development’ work has faced over the years by explaining that it has not only failed to deliver what it promised, but has, in fact, been (and often still is) one of the enabling forces behind Western neo-colonialism. Development aid, Clammer argues, has often been responsible for promoting the negative aspects of globalisation by supporting a homogenisation of values and cultures. He successfully argues that any concept of development focusing only on the ‘external’ aspects of growth, the ones that simply enable further consumption, is bound to generate further poverty of existence. He also explores the cultural, social, political, existential and environmental consequences of development policies.

Clammer claims that Development Theory neither offers the explanatory power to improve our understanding of the nature of the current crisis, nor can it be considered a robust source of practical recommendations for development work on the ground. He argues that separating concrete experiences of human and ecological suffering from development theory is at the root of the problem. He attempts to rectify this error with this book. He proposes a perspective that takes into account the existential issues inherent to the human experience, such as suffering and aspirations, when trying to build development models aiming at alleviating them.

The main failure of conventional development thinking has been a rational economistic conception of the human being, Clammer argues. It is a departure from ‘economism’ that gives ‘development’ its real meaning. The cultural turn
that seems to have finally reached development thinking in some instances now includes real people, emotions, stories and values. This has also proved to have important methodological implications.

The book presents us with a parallel between the notion of self and culture, in the sense that both organise the process of collective identity formation and affirmation into patterns, in an ‘open’ format. Culture is a dynamic process under construction. As such, Clammer underlines the role of development studies in bringing into being the future that we want, as opposed to the one that is being imposed.

Clammer also discusses how aid and culture are intertwined. He goes beyond the general critique of aid as mechanisms for dependency indebtedness, corruption and its social and culturally destructive effects, by exploring the role of culture in promoting aid and the impacts of aid in culture itself.

The philosophical and political problems of development, in particular the politics of culture, are debated at length. While discussing Indigenous Knowledge (IK), Clammer explores the voice of the developees in participatory development—the paradigm of grassroots bottom-up development. Clammer exposes the expropriation of intellectual property rights, as well as the appropriation of such knowledge for personal, military or commercial use. He argues for an urgent need to understand the political nature of IK, and the power and status this knowledge can provide. He defends the role of anthropology in relation to IK as being responsible for understanding the epistemological and ontological assumptions on which they are based, and communicating these forms of knowledge.

Clammer also suggests that using economic anthropology with its vast body of data available on existing alternative economies could suggest alternative solutions to ecological and sustainable post-crisis societies. He guides the discussion on how to link holistically the economy, culture and society. He focuses on articulating alternatives, and looking at how and why people want and acquire goods, i.e., the significance of consumption. He also discusses how to promote consumption without unsustainable expansion of desires, or the meaning behind an ‘education of desire’, coined by Herbert Marcuse.

When discussing culture and climate justice, Clammer claims that social justice and environmental justice are two sides of the same coin. With the notion of environmental justice, Clammer explains the rights matter with the concept of free and reasonable access to a healthy environment. He reflects upon the probable social and cultural consequences of a changing world and how the most vulnerable will be the most affected by it. He explores how cultural practices are strongly implicated in driving climate change. He proposes the idea that culture is a key determinant, on the one hand, in tackling the factors