

# Book Review

**Thinking about development: Development Matters** by Bjorn Hettne, 2009, Zed Books, London, 160 pages, ISBN: 9781848132467, 160 pages

This concise book shines a scholarly light on the field of development in terms of theory, concepts and issues in a way that some of its larger contemporary tomes fail to do.

Development theory and practice is set within a wide historical context and analysed accordingly. Hettne is very influenced by the work of Karl Polanyi, especially his seminal 1944 work, 'Great Transformation' and he credits Polanyi's ideas as the essential foundation for development theory.

Hettne recognises the term 'development' as highly contested but he reminds us that meaning of terms change with context, time and history. While the field of development studies really only emerged in the post war era, he demonstrates that the idea of development has had a much longer incubation, from the birth of the nation state and the start of the enlightenment. He eloquently sets out the particular development issues and problems which challenged the thinkers and politicians of the times, and in so doing brings to life the transitions, fluctuations and ebbs and flows of power and privilege. This reminds us that we too are party to these changes and transitions, although it is sometimes hard in our fast moving global space to step back and observe this.

Hettne is at pains to explain that he takes a discursive approach, by which he means 'the broader academic and public debate' (Hettne:4) on the particular issues of development. He distances himself from the post modern and post development perspectives which 'tend to dismiss the whole tradition of development theory as a Grand Narrative'. (Hettne:4)

In setting out his thesis he takes issue with what he sees as the prevalent 'post development' view, which looks at development as a 'harmful imposition of institutions and values by the West', with the implication that 'the less development, the better'. (Hettne: 2) While accepting some of the critique, Hettne nonetheless feels that there is much in development thinking to be valued and he makes the case for allowing the field of development studies to come of age and grow into 'global social theory'. This is a particularly refreshing approach which involves looking forward as well as back and offers a much more holistic overview to the whole development discourse.

Hettne recognises four stages of development thinking (Hettne:3):

1. 1950s-1960s when it focused on the country and the state as the main agent
2. Recent times when development was linked with globalisation and economic interdependence
3. The current agenda which is to restore some order in the globalised world economy

4. The future challenge which will be to handle 'financial disorder, climate change and what he sees as 'global civil war.

Hettne poses many valuable and challenging questions which are key to all of us who wish to interrogate the concept of development in the light of key values of equality and social justice. His final chapter 'Towards Global Social Theory' offers some insights into future theorising and application, which implies 'that a variety of social experiences from around the world are taken into account as well as a pluralist understanding of development goals.' He makes a very strong and compelling case for the importance of development studies in taking forward this agenda as it is the only academic discipline which has created a 'world wide empirical base for building global social theory by providing concrete knowledge of local cases of development and underdevelopment from the world at large, together with varying cultural perspectives on the meaning of development' (Hettne:133).

Hettne goes on to examine the case for new forms of global governance and illustrates a need to address the issue of 'how to move from Eurocentrism to genuine universalism' (Hettne:130). His strength in this book is to ask the important questions and then leave us to consider them. For this reason alone this book would make a valuable contribution to most social science graduate or undergraduate courses. It also provides a very helpful framework for understanding the historical transitions of the last centuries which have led us to the present global world order.

Finally Hettne points out the need for global social theory to be organised on an interdisciplinary basis, with the need for a combination of specialist and generalist approaches. This chimes well with the work of Bhaskar and Parker (2010) on the need for a new framework of interdisciplinarity in order to address the current challenges of sustainability. My only real criticism of Hettne's book, however, is that he focuses almost entirely on the economic and social issues of development and hardly addresses the other key imperative of our age: how to live within the ecological carrying capacity of the earth. After all, no development will be possible on a dead planet! To me, this illustrates an ongoing problem in academia and in wider public debate and media discussions where there still seem to be some very real issues in integrating the environmental and social agendas. As academics, though, I suggest that we have a stronger duty than most to address this – hopefully Hettne's next book may take up this challenge?

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**Reference:**

Bhaskar,R., Frank,C, .Hoyer, K.G., Naess,P., Parker, J. (eds.) (2010) *Interdisciplinary and Climate Change*, Abingdon, Routledge