

[Tim Forsyth](#)

Book review: Johnson, Craig, 2009: Arresting development: the power of knowledge for social change

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Johnson, Craig 2009: Arresting development: The power of knowledge for social change. London: Routledge. pp. xiii + 194. £17.25 paperback, £85 hardback. ISBN 978-0-415-38153-6 paperback, 978-0-415-38154-3 hardback.

‘Knowledge’ is a difficult thing to pin down. For many development practitioners, knowledge is the expertise and ‘facts’ that consultants or scientists gather in order to justify policy decisions. Or it is the endless World Bank or United Nations reports, statistics, and internet portals that offer information about what actually is going on in the world.

The social-science debates about development in the 1990s changed all of this. Famous books such as James Ferguson’s (1994) *Anti-Politics Machine*, or Arturo Escobar’s (1995) *Encountering Development* offered more deconstructionist approaches to knowledge and the ‘facts’ that underlie development thinking. The point of these works was to highlight how ‘knowledge’ and ‘expertise’ are not apolitical, neutral advice, but can carry embedded politics. These works, and others, began to establish the need to consider discourse within development thinking, and the route to a more politicized approach to knowledge and its implications for policymaking. But at the same time, important works like these have also been categorized too easily by some observers as a postmodern approach to development studies, and consequently somewhat allegedly too academic, rather than something to be adopted practically in development.

Craig Johnson’s *Arresting Development* is a useful update and antidote to these debates. This book is a clearly written and well argued summary of debates about ‘knowledge’ in development studies and – perhaps more importantly – development practice. It uses the insights and depth of debates about knowledge as a politicized theme, yet relates this to recent developments in, say, the World Bank, or into proposals for harnessing contested knowledge more critically in practical development disputes.

The book is divided into two main sections. The first considers how neo-liberalism (and the related schools of neo-classical theory and rational choice theory) have contributed to ‘meta-theoretical’ assumptions within development. The second section then presents how alternatives to these frameworks might be designed and implemented. The focus on current debates and applications makes this book both relevant and valuable for students.

So, at the start of the book (pp. 1-20), we are introduced to some of the controversies surrounding the World Bank’s *World Development Report* and ‘Global Development Network’; and the Canadian International Development Agency, UK Department for International Development, and Institute of Development Studies’ approaches to generating ‘knowledge for development.’ This early section reiterates that knowledge is rooted in historical contexts, as well as current concerns about what is askable and possible. These themes, Johnson argues (p. 3), are the ideologies that shape the construction of knowledge for development. Johnson then illustrates the controversies of these approaches by outlining one particular case of the resignation of Ravi Kanbur, a director of the *World Development Report* in 2000 following disagreements about what form of consultation and framing these reports should have (p.10-11).

The point of this analysis, according to Johnson, is that development practice has become mired in diverse and balkanized approaches to theory and justifications of knowledge, which need further analysis and explanation. Yet, outside the neo-classical model (and associated rational choice) of economics, social science has become hampered by debates about the possibility of generalizing from single case studies (p. 15). Johnson claims this trend is arresting because focusing on single localities can be too removed from general processes of development and inference. Accordingly, Johnson urges readers to expand on what Peter Evans (1995) has called the ‘comparative institutional tradition’ – or ‘an inductive methodology that searches for commonalities and

connections to broader historical trends and problems while at the same time incorporating divergent and potentially competing views about the nature of history, culture and development' (p. 16).

Accordingly, Johnson then takes us on a review of some of the key theoretical (and epistemological) framings of knowledge within development in recent decades. The 'poverty of history' – or the inherent tension between descriptive empiricism and wide-scale inference – is analyzed in terms of debates such as the tragedy of the commons, and the institutions that resource users make around regulating access to common property (pp. 31-36). Here the tension is in the models to explain institutions – from the earlier assumptions about universalistic political behavior by the rational choice school of common property regime theorists, to the more culturally embedded approaches of ethnographers.

A further chapter then reviews the debates within Marxism about unified theories of capitalist development, and the challenges these notions have brought from postmodern critics (pp. 51-78). This chapter engages with some of the more bitter disagreements within social scientists who are seeking alternatives to neo-classical explanations. The chapter again has useful case studies of controversy that neatly summarize historic debates. In one example, Johnson discusses the influence of the US-funded rational-choice research on how peasants engage in insurgencies during the Vietnam War era, and how this research contrasted with different analysis within the traditions of political-economy and the 'moral economy' of peasants (pp. 74-75).

These relatively older debates are then updated in an two other chapters about post-development and development as discourse (pp. 79-108), and then Amartya Sen's various contributions to development as a question of freedom (pp. 109-131). The chapters provide useful summaries for students of what the key points of concepts such as discourse, normalizing debate, and post-colonialism. This section contains up-to-date summaries of controversies about, for example, the World Trade Organization, or the (alleged) discursive strategies employed by bilateral aid organizations such the UK Department for International Development to maintain networks of support despite ideological differences in these networks (Mosse, 2005). The discussion of development and freedom leads onto a discussion of agency and social choice, referring to debates about justice, and practical applications in sustainable livelihoods.

In the final chapter (pp. 132-151), Johnson presents several ideas for resolving many of the challenges listed in the book. This chapters considers ways of operationalizing history, as both a methodology and source of information, within explanations and model of institutions. The key point is that 'the fragmentation of theory and reality reflects a wider fragmentation of economic and social life' (p. 150). We need to acknowledge this fragmentation, and identify who currently monopolizes the legitimization and dissemination of what knowledge is gathered, how it is framed, and for what purposes.

This is a deep book, with wide-ranging references, which engages with philosophy and political debates far beyond the usual remit of development studies. Yet the book is focused upon development studies in a way that provides the readership with useful and clearly-written food-for-thought on various themes of development practice. It seems to be a valuable addition to any general reading list on development theory, or for more specialized development theorists who want to gain more context for their own work.

Tim Forsyth
London School of Economics and Political Science

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