

Book Review: Art, Culture and International Development: Humanizing social transformation by John Clammer

blogs.lse.ac.uk/lsereviewofbooks/2015/02/21/book-review-art-culture-and-international-development-humanizing-social-transformation-by-john-clammer/

21/02/2015

This exciting book aims to place the arts at the centre of debates in development studies by introducing new ways of conceptualizing art in relation to development. Jacqueline Priego-Hernandez is impressed by case studies including theatrical performances “of the oppressed” in India and “third world cinema” in Brazil. This book is recommended reading for both seasoned practitioners and development studies students alike.

Art, Culture and International Development: Humanizing social transformation. John Clammer. Routledge. 2014.

Find this book: 

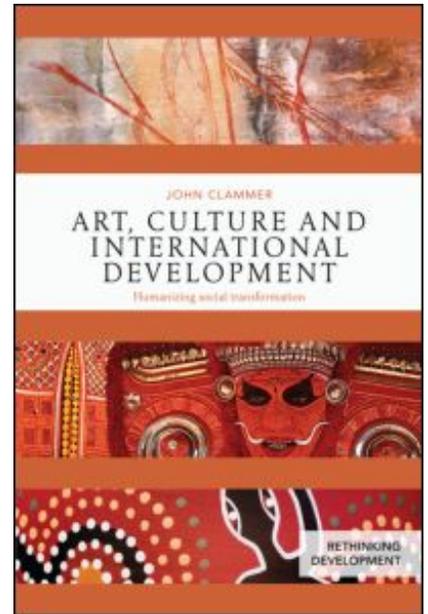
A resourceful, interesting and well-documented book, John Clammer's *Art, Culture and International Development* puts forward the argument that cultural manifestations, through arts and crafts, are intrinsic to social development, complementing the economic and social growth needed to address basic needs.

Through eight chapters, Clammer presents a lucid and richly textured account of the potential of artistic endeavours such as weaving, spatial design and street theatre to address social development issues, but falls short of demonstrating the concrete tangible impacts of such artistic engagements. As such, this generative text would make a great addition to any international development library because of the responses to social development problems it proposes and, chiefly, because of the questions it raises regarding the potential effects of artistic approaches.

Clammer does a very good job in positioning his original approach within the vast field of development studies by quickly reviewing major volumes on the subject and evincing a literature void with regards to arts, crafts and artistic expressions in even critical stances to development. He argues that for a social development that is all encompassing—or holistic, as he calls it—a focus is needed not only on basic needs such as those addressed in the Millennium Development Goals, but also on culture and its expressions. Rooted in this argument is an understanding of development as aiming for those being ‘developed’ to live and live well, not only to survive, which transpires through the book and honours the idea of “humanizing social transformation” in its subtitle.

The book is based on an important distinction between *representing* development and *creating* it (p. 83), suggesting that development is being *enacted* in the mere act of engaging in behaviours that express, reproduce and reinvent culture through art. In this regard, it is successful in showing how artistic manifestations and crafts that we would normally take for granted have the *potential* to address social development problems. Each chapter cogently evinces how the revisited artistic actions offer prospects to “[increase] a sense of dignity, opportunities for expression, meaning generation, enjoyment and conviviality (culture), safety, security and human rights (politics), happiness (psychology) and a benevolent and reciprocal relationship with nature (ecology)” (pp. 138-9).

Clammer's arguments are well grounded in case studies of how arts have been applied to address a diversity of issues, ranging from social justice and consciousness raising to very practical problems such as intergroup relations (e.g. in caste-based settings India). The author skilfully weaves together examples from both the developing and the



developed world, including design for sustainable housing in Japan (architecture as the “arts of sustainability”); theatrical performances “of the oppressed” in India, South Africa and the U.S. (performative arts); “third cinema” and “third world cinema” in Brazil, India, Italy and Nigeria (visual arts); and “literatures of protest, affirmation and identity” in Chile, India and Palestine (literature and word-based approaches to art). Clammer is innovative and daring in including not only what he calls ‘high arts’ but grassroots manifestations of culture including pottery, interior decoration and textile work to show how culture, through art, provides the grounds to signal social problems and propose avenues for addressing them.

As well-documented as Clammer’s examples are, the book could have been even more persuasive had it included more concrete evidence of the impacts of arts, as a tool or “means to development” (p. 139), on noticeable indicators. For example, poverty-alleviation undertakings are implemented because they improve people’s quality of life by satisfying basic needs such as food, sanitation and education, and these effects can be traced through indicators such as improved nutrition, reduced morbidity and increased literacy rates. Given that, according to the book, arts complement these socioeconomic approaches, analogous concrete indicators, being these process evaluations or otherwise, could have been presented for the artistic undertakings discussed. The author does mention that approaches such as theatre work by “raising awareness, changing perception, modifying emotions and presenting potentially transformative alternatives” (p. 78), but tangible documentation (some figures, interview extracts, or participants’ testimonies rather than authors’ theorisations) would have been useful to gauge these outlined effects.

On the stylistic front, readers prepared to tackle extremely long and complicated sentences will be rewarded, for the author offers a myriad of interesting contextual commentaries that enrich the case studies and examples presented. Similarly, each chapter is packed with provocative discussion questions and recommended academic references and online resources, making it an extremely practical source that would enable readers to generate new ideas and applied artistic pursuits in their interventions.

Because of the provocative argument of including culture into holistic understandings of growth and wellbeing, this text is an inspirational account of what truly human approaches to social development can be and, alongside other texts in the ‘Rethinking Development’ series (see also this review of [Popular Representations of Development: Insights from novels, films, television and social media](#) edited by David Lewis et al.) is a recommended reading for both seasoned practitioners and development studies students alike.

Jacqueline Priego-Hernandez is a British Psychological Society chartered psychologist who holds a PhD in Social Psychology from the LSE, where she currently works as a research officer with the HEIF5-funded project ‘*Communicating bottom-up social development: A dialogue between multiple stakeholders in the UK and Brazil*’. She is responsible for producing a practical toolkit systematising the model of social development implemented by grassroots initiatives in Rio de Janeiro. She also leads on the production of a series of impact seminars and participatory workshops in the UK and Brazil, and implement the research communication strategy of our project through the blog [Favelas@LSE](#).

- Copyright 2013 LSE Review of Books