



1-1-2015

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Recommended Citation

Schavrien, J. (2015). Schavrien, J. (2015). [Review of the book Art, culture and international development: humanizing social transformation, by J. Clammer]. *International Journal of Transpersonal Studies*, 34(1-2), 215–218.. *International Journal of Transpersonal Studies*, 34 (1). Retrieved from <http://digitalcommons.ciis.edu/ijts-transpersonalstudies/vol34/iss1/27>



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BOOK REVIEW

Art, Culture and International Development: Humanizing Social Transformation

by John Clammer

(2015; London, UK: Routledge)

Reviewed by

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At present, hard data and economics exercise hegemony in the field of international development. Not just academic research but, consequently, projects on the ground can and too often do bring about damage rather than the improvement they intend. Granted, there can be unintended consequences no matter how excellent an approach may be; but this kind of impoverished thinking increases the likelihood. When economic development is the sole consideration, and when the tools of assessment and creative planning for intervention ignore other aspects of true development, languages are lost; traditional forms of expressive arts and performance fade from collective memory; and damage can be done to religious and spiritual traditions. Whole cultures can be uprooted. Identity struggles and clashes throughout the world—often involving minorities, ethnic, political, religious, sexual—draw strength from these arts, languages, and traditions that are now imperiled. That is to say, such struggles issue from cultural not purely economic challenges and indicate the need for a culturally comprehending/comprehensive approach (Clammer, 2015, p. 8). According to Clammer, his book, released in 2015, is the first to systematically review the relationship between development and the creative arts; he advocates for a kind of development which he calls *holistic* or *integral development*.

Instead of conceiving of culture as a way to advance or retard economic development practices, which, again, can produce damage in the culture under development, Clammer (2015) proposes rather to envision *culture itself* as the all-embracing category (with economic development, one might infer, as a facet of it): “A holistic view of development ... sees

culture at the core of human being-in-the-world” (p. viii). He chooses a vivifying strategy for unfolding his argument, reviewing the major arts one-by-one—although he cannot, of course, cover all the ground. Clammer examines what can or in fact is being done, culturally that is, and why it would enhance development if integrated with economic plans. He covers architecture and film, and other aspects of visual arts as well. He covers performance and writing, including poetry. He inquires into, makes a plea for, design that aims at sustainability. He seeks a creativity specializing in expression to, by, and for ordinary people. Activist intentions are intrinsic to such arts.

If the approach to international development continues as it is, will the International Monetary Fund, with its heavily conditioned loans, or the World Trade Organization, ever come to act strictly in the interests of development for poorer countries? Even if the approach were to retain its nearly exclusive focus on economics, would these organizations, and therefore their actions, come to distinguish profit for developing countries from profit for the corporations seeking large-scale entry into their economies? (The multinationals exercise a precipitous and often disproportionate influence that brings about an early entry into countries ill-prepared to find their own balance.) At the same time that Clammer points out dangers in the present approach, he assigns responsibility not just to political and economic powers in the West but to creative artists as well. The point would not be, as he says in his Preface, to spread a Westernized creativity that is now frequently “socially irrelevant [with] narcissistic preoccupations” (p. viii).

After all, not just developing nations but also what Clammer sometimes calls the “overdeveloped” nations have their dilemmas. If artists are crucial to development, whether in early or late stages of the effort, they need to offer ways out of the corner into which the developed world has painted itself, not merely alleviating suffering by way of entertaining and enriching life with beauty and intellectual stimulation, but potentially shaping the kind of humans we want to be, and the kind of society we want to live in (Clammer, p. 3). The author resurrects prophecies, first penned in 1904-5, by Max Weber in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. Western populations have worked their way into the “iron cage” of a highly rationalized, bureaucratic, and managerial society, focused on cost-efficiency and progress, one which drains modern lives of meaning and enchantment (Weber, as cited in Clammer, 2015, p. 151). Many of the dead-ends of development are at least corollaries if not outcomes of the wrong-headed *de-magified* (*entzaubert*) approach. Artists would benefit no one by replicating Western dilemmas in the poor nations. Even the moniker “poor nations” bears questioning: ecologically poor? spiritually poor? or just financially poor?

As Clammer examines the different arts, he displays an astonishing degree of even-handedness on issues of ethnicity, gender, race, sexual orientation, and so on. How refreshing! He himself gives some credit to Miyoko Ogishima, as his companion in art and his travel guide in exploration. Since she is Japanese and a weaver, she democratizes, as it were, his appreciation of the arts, showing him not just little known art galleries but also craft corners all over the Japanese islands. Furthermore, Clammer himself, born and educated in the United Kingdom, has lived, researched, and taught in not only Great Britain but also Germany, India, South America, Singapore, and elsewhere. Many of his examples of fine visual and film artists, poets, executors of creative activist projects come from places one rarely hears cited in the usual Westernized research. If anyone qualifies as a citizen of the world, it is Clammer.

In his “Visualizing development” chapter, he cites activist films, some appearing from India, China and Nigeria, to name just a few vibrant film communities. He also gives a list of documentaries—for instance, those that support the fast-growing sense of urgency about the planet. In his “Writing development” chapter he names great poets who, though recognized internationally,

remain rooted in their own culture and its needs, such as Pablo Neruda or Octavio Paz. The theatre chapter, called “Performing Development,” offers likewise a heartening tour of endogenous theatre thriving throughout the world; theatre that could benefit from active recognition by nations intervening to bring development.

Two mind-changing examples he gives that centralize what is presently marginalized as creativity/art in development studies are the following. One of them builds on recent biodiversity studies that have shifted views on extinguishing species. Researchers have now recognized that extinguishing even a seemingly marginal species can destabilize the entire ecosphere. They have gained a certain humility, arriving at the realization that they may not understand which species are lynchpins for which structures. Clammer proposes applying this newfound humility to a parallel humility when tempted to interfere with, and therefore, perhaps, to damage or even extinguish certain cultures. The goal should instead be as firm a commitment to cultural diversity as to biodiversity.

A second example addresses the relevance of theatre. In addition to invoking Victor Turner’s (1982) advocacy of theatre as carrying the ritual/spiritual life of many a culture (as cited in Clammer, 2015), he suggests that it is possible to view all social behavior as a form of acting (p. 79). Theatre then becomes relevant at all times everywhere; and culture becomes the all-embracing category rather than an afterthought to development research and praxis, presently laser-focused on financial gain. What seems side-of-the-barn obvious is this: Calling sheerly monetary considerations the only ones relevant to development is, on the face of it, absurd. The triumph of such a view owes much to thought distortions rife in a capitalist approach free of self-questioning. This complacency does not necessarily reflect all capitalist approaches; it most certainly, however, reflects the *rogue* capitalist approach that prevails at present. For such an approach more is better, more of the same: grow and grow, acquire and acquire—whether more goods for individuals or, better yet, more markets first for colonial and now for post-colonial powers. It says that what is good for General Motors (substitute the names of newer multinationals) is good for any given country. Specious reasoning serves instead as a rationalization to support the rogue alliance between development agencies and intruding governments/corporations, an alliance lubricated by big money (cf. Hannah Arendt’s

The Origins of Totalitarianism, 1973, for an analysis of how governments took a wrong turn, especially in the colonial era, in adopting such views—i.e., that fronting for corporations serves a nation best, and offers no threat to citizen rights. Clammer quotes Arendt on other matters, but this particular suggestion is my own).

Clammer's plea is, first and foremost, to question the goals of development. He observes that researchers exhibit a stubborn and telling resistance to do so. He then lays out arguments to demonstrate the following: It is precisely the imaginative faculty that would serve best in a thorough re-vision of the field. The point would be to replace scattershot action with carefully considered goals. He looks to imagination organically situated within each culture, its history, its population. He speaks not just of the imagination of the elite, with its own high arts, but of the people on the streets and out in the fields as well. Researchers and development organizations would consult imagination of, by, and for those who must live the changes. The question to be asked: What makes this human life meaningful? And the answers will and should differ. Clammer paraphrases the prescient report from the Dag Hammarskjöld Institute (1975), which sums up the matter:

[T]he idea included the development of people, not just an increase in the number of things; that development, while certainly aimed at meeting the basic needs of the poor, should also concern itself with the "humanization" of people generally, by seeking to enhance their needs for expression, creativity and conviviality; ... it should be endogenous and self-reliant and must be in harmony with the environment. (Clammer, 2015, p. 41)

Most relevant to this particular issue of *International Journal of Transpersonal Studies* is Clammer's innovative call for, beyond economic justice, beyond even social justice, something which he calls visual justice. To name a few, the poor neighborhoods of San Francisco, New York City, Berlin, Cuenca, or Tel-Aviv need not be hard on the eyes, drab or even sordid. Murals make them a place of splendor; and the murals represent a self-assertion from, a celebration of, the resident population. They often spread political awareness of movements relevant to the neighborhood culture—movements local and international. Most important is an example like this: In the Mission neighborhood of San Francisco, the mural movement, which began when locals took to

graffiti art, beneath the radar, has received its blessing from the city, with walls set aside and assigned, with yearly competitions for the spray-paint artists. Nor has the movement yet been co-opted; there is still real heart, intellect, and even bite in the art (cf. Clammer's [2015] treatment of public art [murals, etc.] vs. the corporate art that might masquerade as such, pp. 46-47).

Clammer's book, in short, does great service to the field of development. It is the exercise of the imaginative faculty, as he argues, which must advance the field. With such a faculty, one can address—not as an afterthought but frontally—questions of value. Hard data alone does not suffice. Nor does a simple focus on economic goals, with an occasional side glance to political goals, which may or may not be appropriate or attainable by imposition for the culture at hand. One must ask: Development—to what end? What makes human life worth living? Even taking an imaginative approach, people should steer clear of didacticism, say, in some approaches to political art, which can drain the art of vitality; people should steer clear of answers set in stone. A garden of answers will be needed, a garden in process, growing new plants in new ways; this will supply the cultural diversity that can help us diverge from the present-day crash course we are on, both with our own well-being and with the planet. It will help us to find a multitude of better ways.

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Note regarding APA style: I have deliberately chosen to write in present rather than past tense, so as to accent the vitality and immediate relevance of Clammer's efforts. My choice to use first person plural, indefinite, in the last sentences, mirrors Clammer's tone throughout the book and captures his meaning.

About the Author

John Clammer, PhD, is Visiting Professor of Development Sociology at the United Nations University, Tokyo where he also runs the film and art programmes, and is Adjunct professor of Art and Society at Kanda University of International Studies and the International University of Japan.

About the Reviewer

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About the Journal

The *International Journal of Transpersonal Studies* is a peer-reviewed academic journal in print since 1981. It is sponsored by the California Institute of Integral Studies, published by Floragrades Foundation, and serves as the official publication of the International Transpersonal Association. The journal is available online at: www.transpersonalstudies.org, and in print through www.lulu.com (search for IJTS).