

# **JOURNAL FÜR ENTWICKLUNGSPOLITIK**

herausgegeben vom Mattersburger Kreis für Entwicklungspolitik  
an den österreichischen Universitäten

vol. XXIII 2-2007

## **PERSPECTIVES ON DEVELOPMENT STUDIES**

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mandelbaum *edition südwind*

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**KARIN FISCHER, GERALD HÖDL**

**Perspectives on Development Studies: A Short Introduction**

Austria is a latecomer. Whereas in many countries development as an academic subject was firmly established several decades ago, in Austria it was not before the 1980s that first attempts were being made at bringing together a motley crew of scholars researching and teaching development issues. These efforts culminated in the foundation of the Mattersburg Circle (Mattersburger Kreis), an Austria-wide network of academics, whose most tangible achievement of this early period is the journal you are reading.

It took nearly another 20 years before Development Studies was set up as a degree course at an Austrian academic institution. Nesting in the crevices of the University of Vienna, the name Project International Development (Projekt Internationale Entwicklung) still indicates its fragile basis. The signpost which showed the way to the project's first office, located in a derelict building outside the campus, adorns the cover of this issue of *Journal für Entwicklungspolitik*, both as a precious archaeological remain and as a reminder of its anything but glamorous beginnings.

The Viennese undertaking shares many characteristics, which Frans Schuurman describes so vividly in his article (see page 45ff.), with its Western European predecessors, above all the divergent disciplinary backgrounds of the scholars involved, ranging from economics to social history and various area studies, and the common goal of contributing towards a better understanding of inequality and domination on a global scale. The success of the Development Studies programme in Vienna as well as various initiatives in other places (the revitalisation of the Commission for Development Studies at the Austrian Academy of Sciences, a Global Studies programme at the University of Graz, and comparable efforts at the Universities of Linz and Salzburg, to name but a few) suggest that all is well. Nevertheless, the increasing institutionalisation of Development Studies could not detract

from a growing unease among its protagonists. Are they and should they be part of a new academic discipline, with their research and teaching still heavily drawing on the academic disciplines in which they were originally trained? Can and should the boundaries separating them be transcended with a view to adopting a new, genuinely transdisciplinary approach to the subject? What is this subject? How shall we approach it? And to what end?

As we know from Alexander Gerschenkron (1962), being a latecomer is not necessarily a disadvantage. Using the experience of others, learning from their mistakes and steering clear of models that have failed helps the late arrival avoid detours and catch up with the most advanced in the field. These were our somewhat presumptuous intentions when we invited several distinguished scholars from abroad to share their views with us – both in this issue and at a symposium in Mattersburg in October 2007 (see <http://entwicklungsforschung.at>).

We have managed to assemble a group of academics who represent different generations, different approaches, have different foci of research but two things in common: they all share a social science background and have all tried to transgress the narrow confines of individual academic disciplines. Henry Bernstein's credentials as a radical thinker date back to the early 1970s (Bernstein 1973), and his analysis has maintained its cutting edge since. About a decade later, Frans Schuurman entered the theoretical fray and played an important role in re-conceptualising development theory after the final demise of the dependency paradigm (Schuurman 1993). Uma Kothari and Aram Ziai both represent more recent intellectual trends and approach their subject(s) from a post-colonial and post-structuralist perspective respectively. As development research is by no means confined to universities, we thought it useful to invite EADI, the European Association of Development Research and Training Institutes, to outline the perspective of an organisation, the members of which to a large degree work in close cooperation with governmental and non-governmental development agencies. By contrast, the African network CODESRIA (Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa) provides not only a non-European point of view but one which stresses the importance of non-conformist approaches within development research.

As we were looking for answers to the problems outlined above, we asked our contributors the following four questions:

*(1) What does development (in a North-South context) mean?*

As Development Studies, like all academic disciplines, is primarily defined by its subject, it seems worth reflecting on the precise meaning of this subject. Possibly underestimating the complexities of, for example, art history's central concern, we argue that development is an extraordinarily contested matter. Some of the most common definitions may even be well off the mark, as they tend to mistake the almost routinely proclaimed goals of development for the process or practice of development itself (see Cowen/Shenton 1995: 28). This confusion and uncertainty may partly be put down to the fact that the proto-discipline (if we see it as such) of Development Studies has had a comparatively short academic history and that the institutional arrangements which hold together such diverse disciplines as geography and history have not yet been realised. In these disciplines the divergent views of what constitutes the subject matter have been resolved by establishing and finally canonising subdisciplines (thus even combining social and natural sciences under one disciplinary roof, as in the case of geography). Development Studies since its inception has been striving for the academic recognition necessary to become a discipline in its own right and thus to be able to formally integrate those areas of research that relate to its subject matter (development economics, for instance, is still regarded rather as development *economics* than as *development economics*). But, first of all, the subject matter itself has to be delineated in a way that convincingly lays the groundwork for any further exploration.

*(2) What and who has influenced you as a researcher?*

Several motives lay behind this almost indiscreet inquiry: on the one hand sheer curiosity; on the other hand we were hoping that the personal trajectories might reveal common patterns (decisive intellectual inspirations, moves across disciplinary confines or returns from tumultuous interdisciplinarity into safe disciplinary harbours, political motives, momentous encounters with the development business, etc.) as well as a diversity of routes by which to travel into Development Studies. Moreover, individual experiences might have corresponded to broader trends in intellectual and political history and thus add some autobiographical colour to an otherwise potentially highly abstract account.

*(3) What do you consider as the main purpose of development research?*

It is a truism that no academic discipline operates in a way that is completely detached from economic and political interests. And yet, there are significant differences between the disciplines with regard to how they define their role and their responsibility. Unlike, let us again say, art history, Development Studies makes particularly strong claims to produce applicable knowledge geared towards specific aims which can, and in the view of many scholars should, be promoted by political and economic actors. This probably also holds true for development-related research within natural sciences such as tropical medicine and agronomy. One of the main issues at stake is the relationship between development research and development practice. Is it a relationship in which Development Studies is reduced to an ancillary role or is Development Studies capable of setting its own research agenda and framing its subject(s) in ways that may even be at odds with the powers that be? Who are the actors to be equipped with the knowledge necessary to achieve the set goals? And what are these goals?

Perhaps there is also another way of conceiving the role of development research, one that focusses on the analysis of social transformations but abstains from drawing practical conclusions. But would that still be development research?

*(4) How would you characterise your approach to development research?  
What do you regard as the strengths and weaknesses of this approach?*

These last two questions were meant to provoke some theoretical and methodological reflection on how to carry out development research. To think about development research not only touches upon the question of disciplinarity versus multi- or interdisciplinarity, but also on the appropriate level of analysis. Should we focus our research on the micro or macro level, on local, regional, national or global processes and structures? Apart from general epistemological considerations we were interested in the actual research being done and in the level of self-reflexivity our authors were prepared to disclose. In this respect, we hoped to get a better understanding of the prevailing mood in which they ply their respective trades. Do they display a sense of scepticism and insecurity or are they self-assured, sharing the enthusiasm expressed in a recent book on development research which praises its 'exciting opportunities'? (Holland/Cambell 2005: 1)

Having outlined the directions we would have liked our contributors to take, let us have a brief look at the results. Most of the articles tried to circumvent the 'confessional mode', as Henry Bernstein called our attempts at probing intellectual biographies. Probably this is due to one of the deeply ingrained habits of academia, the decontextualisation of one's own research, a sort of scholarly 'anxiety of influence' (Bloom 1973).

Evidently, the authors felt more at ease sketching out the subject matter of development research, which they link to issues of inequality and poverty in distant parts of the world. At the same time they stress the problematic nature of the concept, inter alia its Eurocentric implications. But whereas Aram Ziai underlines the discursive construction of 'development', avoids putting forward a positive definition and suggests bidding farewell to the term, both Bernstein and Schuurman in similar ways delineate what development is about: 'the structural causes of the lack of emancipation of people in the South as well as in transitional economies elsewhere and the strategies [...] which are employed to solve this lack of emancipation.' (Schuurman, p. 50)

Most of our authors agree that the combination of analysis and strategic intervention towards normative goals is a central tenet of Development Studies, though they disagree on how to assess this fact. Their views range from Ziai's scepticism, which regards traditional development research as inextricably enmeshed in relations of power, as thus being a vehicle of domination, to Lawo's and Colberg's optimism about the possibilities of improving development practice by fostering the links between researchers and practitioners.

A recurring theme is the question of the appropriate disciplinary approaches and how to combine them. There is almost unanimity that Development Studies does not constitute a discipline but rather a 'field' (Bernstein) or a closely related, interdisciplinary set of approaches which provides more cognitive value than the sum of its parts (Schuurman). But Schuurman goes on to argue that the integration of various disciplines is becoming increasingly precarious, because the role of the nation state as the common denominator of the main disciplines involved (economics, sociology, political science) has diminished (or at least has substantially changed). Within the 'field' of Development Studies it is economics which is seen as particularly influential, all the more so since the 'economics impe-

rialism' within the social sciences has begun to refashion the other strands of Development Studies in its own, neo-classical image (Bernstein). However, Kothari is hopeful that it is precisely its multidisciplinary which may protect Development Studies from losing its critical edge, although she does not think this 'hybrid subject' capable of theoretical innovation.

As far as actual (and future) development research is concerned, the general mood among our contributors is rather gloomy. They (apart from Lawo/Colberg) complain about 'the ever-changing fads and fashions' and 'the new sets of language, tools and professionals that go with them' (Kothari, p. 31), and regard neoliberalism as a massive influence on how, and what kind of, development knowledge is produced. According to several of our authors, the structural analysis of inequality and underdevelopment has gradually been replaced by micro-level analysis, be it the evaluation of development projects, or the many studies on poverty which tend to rely on narrow, actor-oriented concepts. Moreover, Kothari criticises the depoliticisation of development research and Bernstein its quest for 'politically supportable' or 'win-win-solutions', which, in a world of fierce contradictions, may lead to intellectual cowardice. Another criticism raised is that most development research is still western-based (Olukoshi/Nyamnjoh) and that it (re)produces rigid dichotomies between the 'West and the rest', between 'here' and 'over there' (Kothari).

The critical stance which characterises most of the articles in this issue is a rare thing in today's Development Studies, as a cursory check of several leading academic journals in the field reveals. Self-reflection or even self-doubt quite obviously are not the order of the day. On the rare occasions when methodological questions stand at the forefront, it is participatory research and context sensitivity which are presented as remedies against the shortcomings of more structurally-oriented approaches (see, for example, *Journal of Development Studies* 42/7). But, in general, the research community seems to have firmly brushed aside the challenges posed by post-development ideas and is back to normal, instead producing papers on poverty, on security, failed states and migration, but also on environmental, educational and various economic topics, from foreign direct investment to information technologies. Even industrialisation has made a comeback (see *Development and Change* 36/6). Indeed, in the case of many Asian devel-



opment journals, it has never ceased to be a central issue. Here, development is still widely equated with raising productivity.

This is not the only instance where it seems that we go round in circles. More than 30 years ago, Paul Streeten (1974), in a seminal article, asked similar questions and articulated similar concerns to those being voiced in this issue of *Journal für Entwicklungspolitik*. He complained about the fast-changing fashions in development research, called upon scholars to transcend narrow disciplinary confines while at the same time acknowledging the difficulties with interdisciplinarity, rejected the notion that Development Studies was nothing more than the 'soft underbelly' of economics, and addressed the problem of how development knowledge was being produced, who was financing it and to what extent it was falling prey to 'intellectual imperialism'. Streeten's text is an effective antidote against any exaggerated nostalgia for the 'good old times' of Development Studies, but at the same time it is quite sobering to realize how many of the issues raised by him are still unresolved and how many new items have since been added to our intellectual 'to do' list.

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