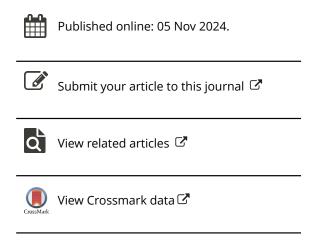# Development After the End of the World

Lives Amid Violence: Transforming Development in the Wake of Conflict,
by Mareike Schomerus, London, Bloomsbury, 2022, 158 pp., £28.99
(paperback), £85.00 (hardback), $115.00 (hardback), ISBN 9780755640836

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BOOK REVIEW

Development After the End of the World

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Lives amid Violence is, for me, one of the most important analyses of the development policy impasse published in the last ten years. The book might at first glance appear to be a classic 'lessons learned' set of policy reflections, but the traditional case study findings are confined to a short appendix at the end. The book itself works at a more reflexive level, examining the 'mental model' or 'identity' that enables development workers to do what they do, especially in contexts shaped by violent conflict. It is this mental model that is the subject of the book, a model of linear causality and universal determinations that is 'no longer fit for purpose' but 'difficult to change' (p. 3). The book seeks to deal with both these aspects, fundamentally problematising the model while, at the same time, suggesting ways that scholars and practitioners might move beyond it. Essentially, Schomerus suggests a mediated policy framework for development in conflict-affected contexts, where development workers first develop themselves – abandoning modernisation theory imaginaries. This, Schomerus states, involves much more than mere 'programme redesign'; it is something that 'needs to hurt, [to] challenge us to the core' in a process driven by a 'commitment to unlearn'; a movement of 'profound cognitive shift' (p. 4). This could be read as nothing less than a project of 'decolonising' the Western development mindset, or (in the terminology of Sylvia Wynter 2003) constructing a 'new genre' of development worker: dismantling the hierarchical power/knowledge assumptions at the core of development worker identity and replacing them with a new openness, based upon 'learning how to live with ambiguity, contradiction and revision' (p. 7).

This is a radical manifesto for the end of development as we knew it. Development should start at home, as a project of self-transformation, before setting out to transform the lives of others, thus, reversing the development problematic (p. 22). Done properly, the transformation of development starts with the transformation of the mindset or identity of the development worker: 'They – we – must do the inner work' (p. 23). The same framework of understanding applies to the problems of societies that are the object of policy intervention. The materiality of under-development or of poor developmental environments is read via the individual minds of those living in (post-)conflict environments. In a fractal mirroring of work upon development worker mindsets,

those to be developed are required to also reject or unlearn their own received identities which blind them to potential opportunities for adaptation. We are in what is essentially a never-ending set of nested mind-world assemblages of self-making, a roller-coaster ride that is impossible to get off. This is what makes the book so powerful.

The shift to working upon the development worker rather than upon the world reflects the fact this is one of the first development policy books to take seriously the 'ontological turn'. This approach problematises the ontological assumptions of modern thought and is usually understood as a key critical component of contemporary decolonial, posthuman and new materialist approaches (see Chipato and Chandler 2022). Everything becomes opaque, inaccessible, a black box. As Schomerus states, everything becomes 'local', by which she means contextualised in its irreducible singularity, thus every metric becomes unusable, every category undermined, every distinction blurred, every essence problematised. This is a world buzzing with transformative agential potentiality. It reminds me very much of the critical perspectives gathered in James Der Derian and Alexander Wendt's recent edited collection *Quantum International Relations* (2022) where agency is everywhere all the time; where every individual is grasped 'literally as a walking wave function' (Der Derian and Wendt 2022, p. 15), always making a difference both materially and ideationally. The only downside to all this agency is that the world itself is subsumed into being a contingent product of human agency rather than external to it. This is described well via the figure of the Penrose Stairs which modulate up and down but have no origin and no end (p. 101).

The world as meaningful externality disappears. The fact that 'one village may look much the same as the next' tells us nothing about the hidden and unseen relations that operate internally and externally, making every village respond differently to crises and problems (p. 183). Thus, the level of policy focus is the unseen, the virtual, the molecular, the quantum, not the actual; this is actor network theory (see Latour 2007) meets second order cybernetics (Foerster 1995) where the relations cannot be traced on the surface but are opaque and closed to the observer or would be intervener. In short, this is a book which adeptly translates the 'ontological turn' into the language of policymaking and policy problem-solving. The book proposes a complexity ontology where the world of appearances lacks meaningfulness, thereby policymakers lack a surface upon which to build any metrics or to attach any governmentalising framework. The approach could, in fact, be understood as de-ontological: the world of essences, entities, and linear causation disappears.

The ontological turn in policymaking thus produces counter intuitive consequences. You might think that if the world is opaque, unknowable via modernist methods of abstraction and representation, then international intervention becomes impossible. No linear causality; no possibility of instrumental or goal-oriented policies. In fact, the opposite is the case. Intervention needs to dig deeper, as Alexander Galloway notes, black boxes (such as the villages above) ungraspable by representational abstractions, require deeper work, each needs to be tested, to be prodded, analysed in

terms of inputs and outputs, perturbations, and responses (2021). Thus, for our purposes, it is important to understand how the 'ontological turn' enables a reworking of development and conflict intervention as a project of international governance and hierarchy.

The reduction of the world to individual minds, produced by and, in turn, producing the world multiplies the interventionist possibilities. This is a programme of meta-intervention: interventionist work is placed in an infinite loop as development workers require development and those that develop development workers equally need to be freed from identities that may inhibit their capacities for enabling the capacities of others. However, at the end of the day, (necessary for every 'genre' of development work) there is a basic hierarchical binary produced – that of development workers and those requiring development. Those who can be resilient, relational and open subjects, always reflecting upon their own identities, and those understood to lack these capacities and thereby to reproduce problematic environments which hamper the possibilities of thinking in more adaptive and resilient ways.

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