

Rethinking Development: Essays on Development and Southeast Asia.
By P.W. Preston. London and New York: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1987.
261 pp.

This set of essays is poorly edited and often ponderously written; it is none the less thought-provoking, both in making explicit previously half-acknowledged arguments, and in passing judgments which demand reflection. It does not, by the way, tell us much of depth or novelty about Southeast Asia, but it does help us to think carefully about the way in which we perceive processes of political and social change, and about the criteria we employ when we praise or criticize each other's contributions.

It is only partly the writing style that makes this book at times heavy-going; it is, more fundamentally, that several different tasks are being attempted by the author. There are four aspects. Most superficially, the work can be seen as a series of commentaries on the work of various social theorists concerned with development. Taken at this level, the discussions are uneven; the writer is too concerned with using the cases to support his own line of argument to worry much about presenting a rounded outline of the works under discussion.

More importantly, the book reiterates, through a series of separate discussions, a warning of the dangers of adopting a narrow perspective on development. We must remain aware of the broader theoretical implications of our comments about particular cases so as to avoid the assumption that we are working within one obvious or correct general theoretical framework. This not only applies to the "social scientist" who sees his approach as being value-free, technical and dispassionate, but equally to the rigid Marxist. This is an important point but it becomes translated by Preston into two further arguments, which do not sit at all easily together.

The overt argument, which sustains the first two chapters on "Rethinking Development" and "The Rediscovery of the Rationalist Tradition", is that the notion of social theorizing as being scientific, and imitative of the natural sciences, is untenable. All social theorizing involves the adoption of particular value perspectives arising from the circumstances of the observer and of the events under study. Theory-building means merely the erection of competing ideologies; and the test of a theory is not its rightness or truth, but rather the extent to which it illuminates, promotes understanding and aids critical moral evaluation. This is not put forward as a new argument; indeed it is developed by means of an examination of the various critiques of logical positivism from the perspectives of phenomenology, philosophies of language, hermeneutics and the Frankfurt

School. The point is rather that, by urging the adoption of what he calls a “dis-integrated” notion of social theorizing (that is, the recognition of diverse discrete “modes of engagement”), Preston can hope to breathe new life into development studies.

But Preston does not take his own advice. If he had simply stated that he happened to find Marxist approaches most useful and illuminating, and had then explained why he disagreed with Barrington Moore’s perspective on liberal-democracy, or Peter Chen’s characterization of development in Singapore (etc.), then there would have been no problem and there might even have been useful dialogue. But, instead of this, he accuses those who do not adopt a Marxist stance of being thereby theoretically faulty, incoherent, and plainly wrong. Poor Barrington Moore! After accepting that his work is morally engaged, intelligent, and worthwhile, Preston accuses Moore of “surprisingly uncritical acceptance of the tenets of liberal-democracy (so that) he never reached the intellectual area inhabited by today’s reflexive-minded development theorists” (p. 110). While Moore is thus castigated, Gunder Frank is defended. Criticisms as to the coherence and adequacy of Frank’s theoretical argument can be dismissed as being beside the point, since he can be validly judged only as adopting the mode of engagement of the politically committed and polemical “spokesman-theorists”; “others misread his work as straightforwardly academic — which makes it crude scholarship — rather than, as is the case, sophisticated political writing” (p. 146). If this is a sensible comment about Frank, why does it not apply also to Moore?

The chapters dealing with Southeast Asia are slightly disappointing. They offer interesting comments but do not build on these to further our understanding of the area. Evers’ remark that Boeke’s “Dual Society” and Furnivall’s “Plural Society” models might contribute to the development of sociology in Southeast Asia, is treated with a heavy hand, but, in the process, the ideological implications of their work are made clear. Chen (on Singapore) and Fisk and Higgins (on Malaysia) are summarily criticized for their facile analysis; but in the process the “policy science” stance receives necessary scrutiny. The responses of Marxist and dependency theorists to the rise of the NICs are examined. The survey is interesting but does not seem to point self-evidently to the thoroughly ambiguous (and repeatedly asserted) conclusion that “the material required to construct a more rigorous Marxist analysis of dependent capitalist development already exists” (pp. 155/176). The final chapter on “Constructing Nation-States in Southeast Asia” reads rather like an afterthought. It is a broad survey which points towards an examination of the concept of Corporatism, but never quite gets there.

This book does have significant overlaps with his previous books, *Theories of Development*, *New Trend in Development*, and *Making Sense of Development*, and is thus rather repetitive; but it focuses our attention on big issues, and it makes us think.

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