



Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs

Waibel, Michael (2011),
Review: Adam Fforde: Coping with Facts: A Skeptic's Guide to the Problem of
Development, in: *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs*, 30, 1, 125-128.
ISSN: 1868-4882 (online), ISSN: 1868-1034 (print)

The online version of this article can be found at:
<www.CurrentSoutheastAsianAffairs.org>

Published by
GIGA German Institute of Global and Area Studies, Institute of Asian Studies and
Hamburg University Press.

The *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs* is an Open Access publication.
It may be read, copied and distributed free of charge according to the conditions of the
Creative Commons Attribution-No Derivative Works 3.0 License.

To subscribe to the print edition: <ias@giga-hamburg.de>
For an e-mail alert please register at: <www.CurrentSoutheastAsianAffairs.org>

The *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs* is part of the GIGA Journal Family which
includes: Africa Spectrum • Journal of Current Chinese Affairs • Journal of Current
Southeast Asian Affairs • Journal of Politics in Latin America •
<www.giga-journal-family.org>



Book Review

Fforde, Adam (2009), *Coping with Facts: A Skeptic's Guide to the Problem of Development*, Bloomfield, CT: Kumarian Pr Inc

ISBN-13: 978-1565492684, 246 pages

Coping with Facts is an unorthodox book by a renowned scholar of development studies, Adam Fforde. He benefits from his 30 years of experience as a consultant in official development aid projects, mostly in Vietnam.

Adam Fforde labels his own book an “extended essay on the nature of development thinking and development policy”. It is unorthodox because it is based on his perception that dominant approaches of national economy and development studies fail to take into account the complexities of current realities (“coping with facts”, in his words). Consequently, he fiercely argues against the paradigm that development is a predictable process with knowable solutions, and he favours instead a sceptical stance to deal with comparisons of development policy. In addition, he believes that reality is far more varied than it appears with single correct rationalities of development theories. To prove that, he builds up his arguments based on a bundle of selected quotes both by other scholars and from his own previous work, such as when he uses the term “homogeneity assumption” (2005) or when he claims that policy does not necessarily matter in analysing the transitional economic process in the case of Vietnam (De Vylder and Fforde 1996).

Within the six chapters of Part I, “The Problem of Development”, he builds up a solid scientific basis for his argumentation. In Chapter 1, he gives an overview and provides contextualization. Fforde firstly introduces key terms as parameters for the analysis of development: intention, agency, and intervention logic. He notes, for example, that development is different from progress because it contains the notion of intention. Adding to this, he asks for agency to host intentionality. Following classic policy ideology, hosts would be the state or international donor organizations. This also implies the question of the capacity of the hosts. Agency and intentionality would ideally be linked to development through knowability. The latter would be based on evident cause-and-effect relationships and allow policy measures to be predicted. In the following chapters, he thoroughly smashes almost all aspects of policy ideology. Without going into detail, he argues, for example, that the Washington Consensus did not lead to increased capital flows to those whose resources were priced comparatively low, although this should have happened following classic development ideology. Another example is his strong advocacy of Levine and Zervos’ (1993) argument that there is little robust relation between economic policy and performance.

Referring to the wide ignorance of the work of Levine and Zervos on the part of the scientific community, he concludes that the literature “is not on the whole about the production of agreed knowledge of cause-effect relationships but rather relies upon dispute to generate what is publishable and teachable” (p. 122).

In Part II, “Exotic Doctrine – Its Local Fates”, he presents examples from three case studies that underscore his line of argumentation that economic development is often not the product of policy but rather the result of other forces. He identifies two successful countries in that regard, Vietnam and Thailand, as well as one unsuccessful country, the Philippines. Utilizing his terminology regarding intention, agency and intervention logic, Fforde labels the Philippines a country representing “intention without success, and the search for agency”. In the case of that island archipelago, Fforde initially presents known reasons for its failure such as unstable patronage networks; a reform-resistant, resilient oligarchy; the tradition of authoritarian-clientelistic leadership; and a general lack of agency. The latter leads to “a tension between ideals of legal texts and realities of state practice” (p. 162). But it eventually becomes clear that for him the effects of openness and the implementation of export-oriented growth policies also contributed to the economic failure of the Philippines. In contrast to the Philippines, he labels Vietnam a country representing “success without intention and a theatre of agency” and Thailand as a country representing “success without intention and the search for cause”.

The case studies in Vietnam and Thailand are described as stories of success but also as *anomalies* in relation to classical development studies. This is because in Thailand economic growth went along with massive corruption and a “weak and blurred developmental state, with little sign of intended development [...]”. In the case of Thailand, one way to explain this anomaly is through the term “competitive clientelism” (see Doner and Ramsay 1997). For both Thailand and Vietnam, Fforde maintains that success cannot be traced back to classic policy; he is of the view that cause-and-effect relations are accessible through practice (through learning by doing, among other things), rather than through blueprints. At the end of his case study chapter on Vietnam, he comprehensively concludes that development studies should be thought of as studies of intentionality in social change rather than in the classical way – namely, as judgements of whether policies are correct and as an examination of conditions for their implementation. In general, he highlights locally adapted approaches as keys to success, whereas he condemns universal approaches (“what works there works here”) and “known solutions”.

Regarding the book as a whole, it might have been worthwhile to have further considered the role of institutions, understood here as “the rules of the game in a society” (in the sense of Douglass North 1990) and institutional theory within a broader context. A deeper analysis of institutions (considered to be dynamic, historically evolved rules, norms and strategies that frame, determine or constrain human agency) and of institutional change might have contributed to a better understanding of change and may have strengthened Fforde’s argumentation.

Further, it might have been interesting for some readers if Fforde had addressed the question of why China has been so successful in recent decades and how this relates to development policies. Within the case study about the Philippines, Fforde emphasizes the importance of a strong backing from the technocrats (p. 176), which is the case in China, as well. But the Philippines also served as an example of export-oriented growth not producing good results. This surely is not the case in China. It would have been enlightening if Fforde had shared his opinion on what the roles of intentionality, agency and intervention logic are within an authoritarian regime such as China’s. But he may just touch upon this topic in his next book.

A slight criticism might be that for readers outside the community of scholars dealing with macro-economic and development issues, Fforde’s line of argumentation might be too fast and disorderly at times. The sheer number of cross-references and new arguments makes the book a tough read, and it is sometimes even hard to recollect. This is partly because of its essayistic nature. Whether undergraduate students can become a target audience for this book, and whether it really evolves into a navigational aid through the vast field of development studies – as promised on the book cover – remains questionable.

All in all, Adam Fforde’s vibrant argumentation and unorthodoxy in thinking have to be very positively appraised. He certainly has an important agenda and a deeply rooted distrust in the power of policy, the belief in which he labels “policy fetishism” on several occasions. In this way, Adam Fforde’s book is a very personal synthesis. It is a provocative publication, which surely enriches the debate in the field of development studies.

References

- de Vylder, Stefan and Adam Fforde (1996), *From plan to market: The economic transition in Vietnam*, Boulder CO: Westview.
- Doner, Richard F. and Ansil Ramsay (1997), Competitive clientelism and economic governance: The case of Thailand, in: Sylvia Maxfield and Ben Ross Schneider (eds.), *Business and the state in developing countries*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

- Fforde, Adam (2005), Persuasion: Reflections on economics, data and the „homogeneity assumption“, in: *Journal of Economic Methodology*, 12, 1 (March), 63-91.
- Levine, Ross and Sara J. Zervos (1993), What have we learnt about policy and growth from cross-country regressions?, in: *The American Economic Review*, 82, 2, Papers and Proceedings (May), 426-430.
- North, Douglass (1990), *Institutions, Institutional Change, and Economic Performance*, Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press.

Michael Waibel

- Michael Waibel, Ph.D., is a senior lecturer in the Department of Geography at Hamburg University. He received his Ph.D. from Göttingen University and has been working on issues of urbanism in Vietnam and China for many years.
<waibel@geowiss.uni-hamburg.de>