

# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Fred Dallmayr. *Alternative Visions: Paths in the Global Village*. Lanham, Md: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 1998. xii + 307 pp. \$34.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8476-8768-8; \$104.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8476-8767-1.

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Published on H-World (May, 2000)

In his book, *Alternative Visions: Paths in the Global Village*, philosopher Fred Dallmayr argues for the importance of “grassroots” and non-Western cultural traditions as part of an increasingly globalized society. For Dallmayr, “Globalization’ involves to a large extent the spreading or dissemination of modern Western forms of life around the globe” (p. 1), which makes it now more imperative than ever to open up a dialogue between the West and the excluded other. He quotes Foucault on the necessity of resisting the “blackmail of the Enlightenment,” in which one is forced to make a stark choice between modernistic rationalism and traditionalistic irrationalism (p. 2), and argues for the creation of a much richer global culture that acknowledges local initiatives and traditions. As such, Dallmayr’s objectives have much in common with the work of writers and teachers of world history who are struggling to develop alternatives to Eurocentric narratives.

In building his global tapestry of alternative visions, Dallmayr gathers together a weighty roster of thinkers from around the world. He begins with an appreciative summary of Johann Herder’s attempt to negotiate the diversity and commonality of humanity via his emphasis on vernacular contexts. He then recounts the critiques of Enlightenment and Orientalism projects found in work by Theodor Adorno, Edward Said and postmodernist writers. He takes these scholars to task, however, for not making any effort to recover the traditions and lifeworlds obscured by these orientalist constructions, and thus leaving humanity in a floating condition of “nonidentity.” Subsequent chapters attempt to fill this vacuum by considering possibilities for liberation and self-understanding found in the work of liberation theologians, contemporary Buddhist and Islamic thinkers, Mohandas Gandhi, Rabindranath Tagore, African anti-colonialist philosophers, and scholars working with the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies in Delhi. Along the way, he considers the politics of memory via a discussion of Marcel Proust, Walter Benjamin and Martin Heidegger, and evaluates the desirability of universal

procedural law via a critique of Jürgen Habermas. He finishes with a recapitulation of Immanuel Wallerstein’s argument that a truly anti-systemic movement has to incorporate a critique of Western science and rationality.

The work of Hans-Georg Gadamer sets the tone for this philosophical odyssey. Dallmayr draws upon Gadamer’s hermeneutics for a process by which the knowledge of the other “proceeds from the vantage of situated modes of self-understanding” (p. 7). Thus, in Dallmayr’s global survey, rootedness in local culture is “a frame of reference through which development of any kind can be discussed and formulated,” and through which a people or society can take part in the global community on terms other than abject capitulation to hegemonic Enlightenment rationality (p. 247). Presumably, Gadamer also provides implicit justification for the fact that Western thinkers constitute over half the subject matter of the book, thus situating Dallmayr deeply in the Western academic tradition.

Dallmayr raises several valuable and interesting points over the course of his odyssey. He argues that development has a cultural dimension, and that the very criteria by which we differentiate “developed” and “undeveloped” societies are culturally rooted value judgments. Once we have recognized the cultural dimensions of development, we can also recognize the extent to which “cultural” paths toward self-cultivation and self-understanding are also theories of development that provide alternatives to rationalist and economic perspectives (pp. 241-9). In valorizing the cultural, Dallmayr takes pains to differentiate his perspective from reactionary revivalism in which culture is put forward as an empty symbol of political identity. He emphasizes that the recovery of local culture should not be understood as a return to a static past, but as active engagement with the present and future, and the posing of critical alternatives to hegemonizing trends. Thus, from among writers African decolonization, Dallmayr is partial to the work

of Cabral, who treads a middle path between Afrocentric ethnophilosophy and proponents of Western Marxism. Similarly, when writing on South Asian nationalism, he prefers the flexible and culturally rooted nationalism of Gandhi over the political engineering of secular modernists like Nehru (p. 213).

Beneath all of the careful theoretical distinctions, Dallmayr's book is essentially a celebration of diversity and multiculturalism, and, as such, has failed to overcome many of the difficulties of a multicultural approach. He is acutely aware of the danger when talking of other traditions that difference may become assimilated into Western liberal norms and vocabulary, thus "damaging the integrity of alien lifeworlds" (p. 132). He is not so sensitive to the danger of superficial and decontextualized analyses that are the bane of many multicultural surveys. Dallmayr's superficiality is manifested not so much in excessive generalization (as is so often the case in world history textbooks and surveys), as in excessive selectivity. For example, in his discussion of Confucian thought, Dallmayr focuses on the process of self-cultivation as a simultaneously social and personal endeavor. It is an attractive discussion of Confucianism, to be sure, but ignores other possible constructions of the Confucian tradition. The use of Confucianism as an ideology of state order in Singapore is an appropriation of the kind that is critiqued by Dallmayr in other contexts. On the other hand, aspects of Confucianism that offer a moral justification of hierarchy and kingship, or which focus on the very practical and mundane details of proper ritual and etiquette, are completely ignored. If we want to valorize local traditions as alternatives to homogenizing Enlightenment hegemony, themes such as these which flatly contradict liberal Enlightenment values should not be so easily dismissed. Even more to the point, he does not consider the more recent appropriation of Confucianism as an ethic of family values which supposedly underlies the success of Chinese businessmen at a global scale. This Confucian ethic clearly facilitates the kind of global economic and ideological hegemony that troubles Dallmayr.

The limitations of Dallmayr's "alternatives" are

closely tied to his unreflective conceptualization of culture. He defines nations (as distinct from nation-states) as "sedimented lifeworld of a people (or a conglomerate of peoples), nurtured by shared historical experiences that can be, and often are, diverse or conflictual," (p. 192) and culture is understood accordingly as the heritages of particular societies or groups. Thus, global society is envisioned as a mosaic of discreet cultures and societies. Repeated reminders by Dallmayr of the diversity within cultural traditions and societies, and of interactions between them seem pro forma, with little effect on the course of his analysis. Should we so readily dismiss Westernized Third World elites as merely "assimilated," or can we understand them in terms of the kinds of synchronism which have produced such a wide variety of popular and elite religious traditions and variations around the world? Being "situated" is not always so straightforward as Dallmayr seems to suggest. Dallmayr correctly points us to the importance of locality in understanding and constituting a global society, but takes the boundaries of the local, and the dichotomy of internal and external too much for granted. He is unable to supplement his emphasis on locality with a global perspective that is something more than an agglomeration of discrete cultures.

In short, Dallmayr provides an excellent plea for the incorporation of culture and non-Western thought into our understanding of development and global society. Yet, his very drive for the incorporation of diversity leaves him unable to develop a vision of globality that is an "alternative" to the mosaic of discrete cultures that already makes up most understandings of the global order, including the vision of a Western culture that is overtaking and homogenizing the rest. Dallmayr's drive to give voice to other traditions has also shaped much of my own writing and teaching of world history, and the insights and shortcomings of *Alternative Visions* has helped me to rethink many of my own assumptions.

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**Citation:** Adam McKeown. Review of Dallmayr, Fred, *Alternative Visions: Paths in the Global Village*. H-World, H-Net Reviews. May, 2000.

**URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=4069>

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