

Book Review:

The Tyranny of Experts: Economists, Dictators, and the Forgotten Rights of the Poor. William Easterly. New York: Basic Books 2014.
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Who is the development community? What are they doing? What are their roles in addressing the Global South's development issues? Why are many foreign aid projects found to be ineffective? How achievable and sustainable are the global development goals? To what extent has development work improved the rights of the poor?

In September 2015, I attended a conference on education and development at Oxford, taking with me the above questions and William Easterly's book, *The Tyranny of Experts: Economists, Dictators, and the Forgotten Rights of the Poor* (2014). However, I purposely delayed reading the book until the last day of the conference so I could form my own perspective of the development community before my ideas could be influenced by Easterly's book. On the flight home, I managed to almost complete the readable and very thought-provoking book. It provided me with a holistic view of international development and answers to most of my questions. I also found explanations for current development endeavors that were reported at this conference and elsewhere.

In this book, Easterly, the author of an influential 2008 Hayek Prize book, *The White Man's Burden* (2006), makes a strong case for the importance of the rights of the poor in many attempts of achieving development in the Third World. The book provides in great detail the history of international aid and development. I very much valued the author's work that provides the audience with an in-depth knowledge about the origin of international development and related notable figures in the field. He traces through international aid trajectories, pointing to the evolution of a technocratic consensus on development, from the early years of the 20th century in China with Western semi-colonial interests, then in Africa with British colonial involvement during World War II, to the end of 1950s when liberal ideas in Columbia were practically defeated by America's Cold War foreign policy.

The Tyranny of Experts depicts how the debate about autocracy versus freedom never happened, leading to the technocratic illusion of the development community. Particularly, though it was acknowledged that the extremes have now become less extreme, the focus on what the author calls the "Blank Slate" (versus learning from history), nations (versus individuals), and conscious direction (versus spontaneous solutions) has characterized the autocratic approach to development over the last century. These dichotomies also frame the book's backbone theses, constructed into three major parts: Can nations be managed like a blank slate or do they each come with their own historical experience? (Part Three); Are the rights of individuals secondary to the management of the state, or do indestructible rights of individuals take precedence over the state? (Part Four); and Does conscious design or spontaneous solutions work better in the context of solving development problems (Part Five)?

Easterly shows that the Blank Slate mentality, representing what both Karl Popper and Friedrich Hayek referred to as technical solutions borrowed from natural sciences, has embedded in the contemporary one-size-fits-all development policies. Presenting the opposing views of two Nobel Prize winning economists, Gunnar Myrdal and Friedrich Hayek, Easterly points out how knowledgeable experts have bypassed learning from a country's past, imposing coercive top-down development goals on other countries. Easterly's critique of the national development ideal spurred by the World Bank and the IMF, and enforced by nationalist leaders is persuasive. He argues that such exclusive emphasis on national material well-being impedes the development of individual freedom and poses a threat to minority groups. Indeed, while most giant aid agencies have focused too much on

meeting the national goals, little contributions have been made to advancing equal rights of local people. As a result, myriad evidence in the book demonstrates that overly planned solutions worth hundreds of billions of dollars in aid money have contributed little to ending global poverty. Unfortunately, the fundamental debate on what the author sees as “authoritarian” versus “free development” never took place.

The bottom line throughout the book is that in the absence of individual rights in many countries, issues of poverty are never properly and rigorously addressed. In fact, the book reveals how the rights of the poor have been abused by the autocratic governments and (un)deliberately ignored by international aid agencies. With sharp analysis of various compelling case examples in African, South American, and Asian contexts, the author vividly illustrates the failure of the expert “scientific” approach to development. Some of these stories are known to the wider public, many come as insiders’ anecdotes, but taken together, they demonstrate one simple fact: authoritarian ideology reigns the international development discourse. Ironically, even an influential aid institution such as the World Bank adopts a “nonpolitical” Blank Slate technical approach, in attempts to deal with chronic problems of the Third World. Apparent from Easterly’s argument is that it is these technocratic solutions that have made recipient states more dependent on foreign aid. It is time for international development organizations to realize and adopt a free development approach, the key to resolving the deep-root causes of global poverty.

Easterly’s views about development explicitly side with Adam Smith, and especially Friedrich Hayek, whose liberal ideas inspired Amartya Sen (1999) to write the classic book *Development as Freedom*. Though viewing poverty from different angles, these authors all underscore the advancement of individual rights, seeing bottom-up approaches to political and economic freedom as the solution to sustainable development. This belief is a telling explanation for the empirical evidence as to why even the poorest people still wish to have “the choice to decide what we need”, not just merely food and shelter (p. 151).

Though very much persuaded by the author’s argument that the real cause of poverty lies in “the unchecked power of the state against poor people without rights” (p. 6), I was left wondering the author’s perspectives on the downsides of the market-based individual-centered approach to development, especially as perceived from collectivist societies. What is the role of collaboration or collective action in an individualist approach? How would collectivist values align with individual freedom? I also wish that the author would have given more credit to the aid agencies, particularly those of medium and small scale, what he alluded to as Searchers in *The White Man’s Burden*, for the valuable work they have done at enhancing human rights in certain parts of the developing world. It is worth acknowledging that their efforts have furthered positive changes in the development world, which is what I observed in part at the conference I attended. If these changes are really true, books such as *The Tyranny of Experts* have contributed to the changing view and practices and undoubtedly, should be read by those who study and work in the field of international (education) development.

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