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Commodifying Development Experience: Deconstructing Development as Gift in the Development Blockbuster

David Lewis*

This paper discusses the recent rise of popular ‘blockbuster’ books written by international development industry insiders and produced by commercial publishers. The paper explores a set of common stylistic devices found within this emerging genre. Though each book is different, a key trope is the story of an author’s earlier professional life – the hard lessons and gritty insights that have supposedly emerged from it – that normally underpins each narrative. By living the challenges involved in development work at first hand, and by making mistakes and experiencing epiphanies along the way, these author-professionals want readers to know that they have found out the hard way that long cherished beliefs about development now need to be questioned. Readers are invited to relive these lessons and epiphanies, and to think and act differently about development by upholding a highly pragmatic form of development professionalism. Combining elements of research monograph, self-help book and personal memoir, these development blockbuster books can be understood not only as commodities, but also as part of the development gift. The authors promise a gift of experience but in reality, these books are mundane commodities enmeshed in capitalist exchange relations.

Keywords: international development; aid; publishing; gifts; commodification

Introduction: development writing and personal wisdom

This article explores the recent rise of popular books about international development by insider authors, a literary genre that I have termed the ‘development blockbuster’. Such books are best typified by titles such as Jeffrey Sachs’s *New York Times* bestseller *The end of poverty: Economic possibilities for our time* (2005), William Easterly’s *White man’s burden: Why the West’s efforts to aid the rest have done so much ill and so little good* (2006), Ha-Joon Chang’s *Bad Samaritans: The guilty secrets of rich nations and the threat to global prosperity* (2007), and Dambisa Moyo’s *Dead aid: Why aid is not working and how there is another way for Africa* (2009). There are many others, and each of these authors has gone on to produce sequels to these works. There are less well known examples of the genre too, including Thomas Dichter’s *Despite good*

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intentions: Why development assistance to the Third World has failed (2003) and Michael Maren's (1997) *The road to hell: The ravaging effects of foreign aid and international charity*. These books offer an up-to-date analysis of global poverty and development for both the general and the more specialised reader, provide wide-ranging diagnoses of key global development problems, and then usually go on to prescribe a set of solutions that are claimed to be far-reaching, radical and definitive. These books are usually – though not always – published by a commercial publishing house, seek to reach a larger market than traditional academic books, and are heavily promoted by publishers. The aim is to reach as wide an audience as possible and to engage and influence public debate.

In this paper, I am not so much concerned with whether these books have interesting or useful things to say (and some of them undoubtedly do), but instead with the form and substance of the commodified personal wisdom that is found within them. Although each book is different, this genre has certain distinctive characteristics that are shared in terms of structure, form and content. First, I suggest that an autobiographical element is central to the genre, though this is not always immediately apparent. The authors of the development blockbuster are normally development 'insiders' who have once worked within an official or non-governmental development agency, but who now look back and re-evaluate the meaning and effectiveness of their earlier work. A second key characteristic is the primary concern of the writers of development blockbusters with 'big picture' issues and the promise of implementable, generalised prescriptions. Most authors aim to challenge what they see as conventional wisdom and public perceptions around the role of international aid, the work of development agencies and the impact of humanitarian action. Conventional approaches are first established, and then what then happens in most of these books is that an element of reevaluation takes place, both of these now-discredited approaches, and sometimes also of the writer's earlier role in them. Third, there may be an epiphany experienced by the author that takes place, which then helps to make room for a new perspective on the right way forward. Fourth, this epiphany informs an element of memoir that tends to lie at the heart of these books, which I suggest are essentially concerned with communicating a form of expert knowledge as 'personal wisdom'. The paper ends with some comments on the role that this type of writing may play within the wider aid chain that forms part of the landscape of international development.

There is a long tradition of popular writings about improving the world, and oneself. For example, Dale Carnegie's original self-help book *How To Win Friends and Influence People* (1936/1981), which has remained in print continuously since the 1930s, can be seen as an example of commodified personal wisdom that has been successfully sold in great quantities for generations (Godbout 1998). This book made the case that treating other people well (being selfless in one's social relationships) was a goal in itself, with success in the form of material benefits accruing only in a secondary way, as a supplement or bonus. In his book *The world of the gift* Jacques Godbout explains that there is an important 'paradox' at the heart of Carnegie's central idea: 'even in the mercantile sphere, the instrumental use of social ties is not as simple as it appears in utilitarian discourse' (Godbout 1998, 80). The self-help book as a manifestation of the

growth of advice as commodity has continued to be a major growth area of the publishing industry, as a visit to any bookshop today confirms.

The emergence of the new form of writing about development that I term here the ‘development blockbuster’ book is, I believe, part of a related, though slightly different trend. These books are hybrids that combine elements of at least three other traditions of writing: they are part self-help book, part personal memoir and part academic text. While clearly not self-help books in the traditional sense, they provide a new twist to the form, since they are offered as prescriptive books about ‘how to help others better’. They aim to inspire their readers in similar ways. At the same time, they are memoirs because they draw to some extent on their author’s personal biography, informed as they are by a professional life spent in development. Finally, they share many characteristics with scholarly texts (though with an element of polemic), deploying facts and figures alongside personal narrative and sometimes also drawing on their authors’ own, as well as others’ more formal ‘academic’ research studies.

There are, of course, many precursors to the development memoir. Colonial administrators such as G. Howard Jones (1936) and John Beames (1896/1961) wrote up their experiences in Africa and India in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century respectively in robust accounts that tried to convey their frustrations with the conventional development policies of the day. But such memoirs took a very different tone: they were written by people who saw their careers primarily in terms of vocation and service, rather than by modern development professionals. There are also some earlier types of popular development books published by mainstream publishers that aim to provoke public debate, such as Teresa Hayter’s (1971) *Aid As Imperialism* and Susan George’s *How The Other Half Dies* (1976). However, these were arguably research-based books that aimed to combine this with political critique to challenge mainstream assumptions with few autobiographical elements. They were also far more politically radical books than most of today’s development blockbusters, advocating structural reforms based on a left wing political economy critique. Looking back, the popular commercially-published blockbuster form of the critique of development professionalism began with Graham Hancock’s *Lords of Poverty: The Power, Prestige, and Corruption of the International Aid Business* (1989), which caused a minor storm among those working in the development industry when it was first published.¹ In the early twenty-first century, the genre has gone mainstream.

The development blockbuster shares with these earlier forms of writing an intention to pass on hard-won personal experience to those who are currently grappling with development problems.² As Chakrabarti and Berthon (2012) remind us, the Latin roots of the word ‘experience’ refer to the idea of gaining knowledge through repeated trials and trying something out for oneself, and that experience can take many forms, including social, spiritual, mental and material. Yet the commercial form and commodified nature of the development blockbuster are something new. These books are generally designed for the mass market, and they may also feed into an associated media campaign that includes author appearances on television talk shows, celebrity endorsements, author web-sites and the making of YouTube videos.³ Such books reflect

one of the ways that the aid chain interlinks both commodities and gift elements within its relationships, as Stirrat and Henkel (1997) have argued in their influential study of the development gift. The personal wisdom of these aid professionals or academic consultants that is initially presented as a gift of experience based on the benefits of long years in the field or in the front line of agencies, offered perhaps to colleagues and friends in the first instance, has now become transformed into a saleable commodity that embodies this contradictory notion of development as gift.

Having briefly characterised the development blockbuster and contextualised the genre as it pertains to the worlds of business and the context of international development, the remaining sections explore aspects of these books' structure, form and content. Ideas from the anthropology of the gift are then drawn together and used to contextualise the development blockbuster as part of a shift to new forms of commodified knowledge that underpin the wider gift relationship within international development.

Deconstructing the development blockbuster

It is useful to begin with some thumb-nail sketches of some of the development blockbusters under discussion, and to summarise some of their contents. In *The End of Poverty* (2005), Jeffrey Sachs argues that it is the inability of the poorest countries to get a foothold on the 'bottom rung' of the ladder of economic growth that poses the main barrier for development and poverty reduction. He outlines his ideas for diagnosing the problems of specific countries through a 'clinical economics' approach that takes account of a country's specific complexity in order to diagnose its problems and prescribe suitable treatment. He argues that international development aid should be increased to meet United Nations targets and that, if development interventions are more carefully planned and delivered, extreme poverty can be eliminated by the year 2025. An academic macroeconomist, Sachs has served as economic adviser to a range of countries in Latin America, Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union since the 1980s, and the book is illustrated with case studies that draw on this experience.

Another high profile blockbuster, William Easterly's book *The White Man's Burden* (2006), is a direct critique of Sachs's approach. A former World Bank economist, Easterly takes issue with Sachs's faith in the ability of the development industry to address global poverty effectively with a swingeing critique of top-down planning, which he sees as both inefficient and ineffective. He argues instead that development can only be built from the bottom up, based on local entrepreneurship and innovation. Easterly's web-site introduces the book as follows:

In his previous book, *The Elusive Quest for Growth*, William Easterly criticized the utter ineffectiveness of Western organizations to mitigate global poverty, and he was promptly fired by his then-employer, the World Bank. *The White Man's Burden* is his widely anticipated counterpunch—a brilliant and blistering indictment of the West's economic policies for the world's poor. Sometimes angry, sometimes irreverent, but always clear-eyed and rigorous, Easterly argues that we in the West need to face our own history of ineptitude and draw the proper conclusions, especially at a time when the question of our

ability to transplant Western institutions has become one of the most pressing issues we face.⁴

Moving from the higher profile books that have populated some of the international bestseller lists in recent years, we can also illustrate the genre with an example of the more personal, niche book aimed at a smaller more select readership and produced outside the world of the mainstream commercial publishers. Dichter's (2003) *Despite Good Intentions: Why Development Assistance to the Third World has Failed* is the author's reflections on thirty-five years of work in the international development field with a variety of development agencies including the Peace Corps, the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and the World Bank. Dichter's analysis ranges over the aid industry's well-intentioned but ultimately incompetent and self-serving efforts to reduce poverty. The book adopts an innovative style and structure, with eight chapters accompanied by a total of eighteen semi-autobiographical short stories featuring an aid worker character named Ben. Each story illustrates a different example of the ways that development interventions fail. For example, Story Twelve is entitled 'For the People, By The People', and outlines the compromised reality of development professionals' efforts at undertaking a participatory rural appraisal (PRA) exercise in a local community in Bangladesh.

Another example of this niche is Maren's (1997) *The Road To Hell: The Ravaging Effects of Foreign Aid and International Charity*, a book that operates as a kind of 'misery memoir' about the author's 'experiences with aid organisations over nineteen years around Africa' (Maren 1997, 11).⁵ The tone is one of profound disillusionment. The book characterises the world of aid and charity 'as an industry, as religion, as a self-serving system that sacrifices its own practitioners and intended beneficiaries in order that it might survive and grow'. Indeed, it has been pointed out that there is an overlay of Christian morality that informs both religious and secular Western development work (Stirrat and Henkel 1997). The author begins his story working as an idealistic Peace Corps volunteer in Kenya during the late 1970s, but concludes with observations from a period of working in Somalia two decades later that 'made me see that aid could be worse than incompetent and inadvertently destructive. It could be positively evil' (Maren 1997, 12).

Such brief summaries cannot do justice to what is a diverse genre, but they can give a flavour. I suggest that although these books vary in their form and content, they share the following common characteristics:

1. They are *prescriptive*, offering a robust diagnosis of what is wrong with the world of development and indicating ways that things should be done differently.
2. They claim to offer a *comprehensive* view or diagnosis of a whole field of development, a substantial sub-sector of the field such as humanitarian work, the role of agencies such as international NGOs, or the problems of a particular country.

3. They are aimed at a broader readership than academia or policy researchers, and seek to engage public debate and reach as *wide an audience* as possible – with some (such as Sachs and Stiglitz) having broken into the international bestseller lists.
4. They are each to some extent *personal* narratives, drawing on the author's own career experiences as a practitioner, applied researcher or consultant. Such experience is central to the 'truth claims' that are made in the books, and to the type of personal wisdom that they contain.

Development blockbuster books are also *commodities*, and can be understood in relation to wider changes within the worlds of book publishing and academic knowledge production. First, the rise of these books is in part an outcome of wider transformations that have taken place within the modern commercial publishing trade. Thompson (2010) has identified the rise of publishers' search for what he and they refer to as 'the big book', seen as a solution to what he terms the 'growth conundrum' in publishing, brought on by the challenge of achieving growth within a market that is 'essentially static'. The big book allows publishers to concentrate on fewer titles than before in favour of a strategy of trying to identify 'expected big-sellers'. These do not exist as isolated texts or products, but are socially constructed within a Bourdieu-style 'field' through the creation of wider 'buzz' that builds both the book and its author's reputation as a form of symbolic capital.⁶

Second, academic knowledge itself has become more commodified, as the university has become more fully incorporated into wider market systems. For example, in his book *The Gift* (1983/2006) Lewis Hyde writes of the gradual transformation of academic production and exchange from 'gift economy' to commodity chain. Research papers were in earlier periods seen primarily as voluntary 'contributions' to academic peers and to wider society, exchanged within learned societies and conferences, and often published by university presses. Today research has increasingly become a commodity to be bought and sold in an 'academic market place' in which academics play more entrepreneurial roles and interact with research funders, consultants and commercial trade publishers. At the same time, development has also been 'celebritised' within a powerful mix of morality and consumerism, as Richey and Ponte (2011) describe in their recent book *Brand Aid*.

These books use the language of the personal as a framing mechanism for a new form of professional knowledge. Yet, as Burdell and Swadener (1999, 25) point out, biography of this kind can operate in complex ways. Personal narratives carry both an irresistible appeal and an ambiguous power:

[They] ... have long been used in education to evoke perspective taking, compassion, and critique of prevailing 'common sense' assumptions and to problematize categories of difference ... among the strengths of personal narratives is their potential to fracture the artificial closure of discourse ... These narratives can create a space for conversation, reflection and critique.

The critique of common sense assumptions is a key component of the development blockbuster genre we have identified. But the interweaving of autobiographical themes and critical advice giving may also mean that the narratives may also easily move into what these authors describe as ‘careless slippage into individualistic self-promotion’, or into the degeneration of content such that it may be reduced to becoming part of mere ‘autobiographical Manifestos’.

Development blockbusters render their writers vulnerable to the criticism that they present reductive and over-simplified accounts of complex issues, undermined by their resort to personal knowledge claims and overbalanced by too much autobiographical voice. For example, a development blockbuster that has been at the receiving end of such criticism is Elizabeth Pisani’s *The Wisdom of Whores* (2008), a fast moving account of its author’s experiences in the HIV/AIDS world. Pisani interviews sex workers and provides withering critique of mainstream health professionals and development agencies. Like many development blockbusters, the book is both skilfully written for its audience and strongly marketed (the title alone must have been a gift to the publishers). While it was well-reviewed in some quarters, Jeremy Laurance in *The Independent* (May 9, 2008) drew attention to dangers of over-simplification:

... Pisani is a victim of her own ideology in insisting she alone has a clear vision of what needs to be done and others have failed to grasp the essential truth about AIDS ... In Pisani’s world, you only have to want something enough to make it happen. Human frailty is not a problem. Political, economic, cultural and religious pressures – all these are swept aside. If we flooded the world with condoms and clean needles and exhortations to use them, the epidemic would be over. Problem solved.⁷

Development blockbusters as texts

If we now turn to the analysis of these books as texts, it is possible to identify a number of recurring rhetorical strategies and stylistic devices deployed by the authors. The first is the idea of personal transgression of rules or boundaries, which the authors use to position their argument within a counter-cultural frame. This is intended as a means to challenge conventional thinking, or even to shock the reader out of complacency. For example, Easterly (2006, 4) begins his book by suggesting that he somehow feels bad having to point out the extent of the terrible damage caused by well-meaning development people with good intentions. He implies that he has – at least in the eyes of some people – perhaps crossed a line in terms of modern morality:

I feel like kind of a Scrooge pointing out the second tragedy [the failure to get medicine to dying poor children] when there is so much goodwill and compassion among so many people to help the poor. I speak to many audiences of good-hearted believers in the power of Big Western Plans to help the poor, and I would so much like to believe them myself. I often feel like a sinful atheist who has somehow wound up in the meeting of the conclave of cardinals to choose the successor to the saintly John Paul II.

Easterly claims a duty, despite a certain reluctance, to spoil the feel-good atmosphere at the party of international development and humanitarianism by ‘bringing things down to earth’, and his use of religious analogy also implies that he sees himself as ‘polluting’ the sanctity of a sacred space. In this way Easterly hopes to engage his readers in a conspiracy to betray what he sees as the cosy illusion shared by the professional development community and trusted by the public.

A second trope is the way that the writers of development blockbusters usually invoke the power of professional experience in giving weight to the analysis and prescription. For example, this faith in the power of experience comes across as underpinning the solutions to the problem of ‘fixing failed states’ proposed by Ghani and Lockheart (2009, 6) in the context of their work in Afghanistan:

There is now a stock of experience in transforming states; practice has been far richer than theories of politics and power. The last sixty years have witnessed enormous progress in innovation and governance, particularly in the relationship between the state, the market and civil society. As a result, the scale of the challenge is much more manageable than it was in 1945 ...

What is particularly distinctive here is the idea of the renewal of professionalism in a strongly managerialist sense as providing a concentrated technology of organisation as the most appropriate solution to problems around the state that many others would more conventionally see as a set of primarily political problems.⁸ This signals a central idea that is found the development blockbusters of the positive transformative power of a new, pragmatic type of professionalism that is mostly oriented towards letting markets work within a post-Washington Consensus policy setting. This is of course in line with the increasing dominance of managerialist ideology: the idea that there are organisational solutions to all types of problems.

This leads us into a third device, which is the critique – at least on the surface - of conventional development thinking. In *The Bottom Billion* (2007, x-xi), Paul Collier begins by sensibly arguing that unhelpfully narrow framings of knowledge about development from within traditional professional specialisations and academic disciplines tend to limit vision and practical application:

Part of the reason that single-factor theories about development failure are so common is that modern academics tend to specialise: they are trained to produce narrow beams of light. However, in my career I have written books on rural development, labour markets, macroeconomic shocks, investment, and conflict. And for a while I was working for Joe Stiglitz, who was really interested in everything and had something ingenious to say about much of it. This breadth had its advantages. Eventually I came to see that four distinct traps explain the countries now at the bottom.

The critique of the existing development knowledge frame is made apparent through a personalised referencing device, in this case a reference to an earlier working experience with Joseph Stiglitz. Stiglitz is, of course, another writer of development blockbusters,

with his book *Making globalization work* (2002) having reportedly sold more than two million copies. Between 1998 and 2003, Collier was director of the World Bank's Development Research Group, where he worked and exchanged ideas with Stiglitz. Related to this critique of conventional academia is the idea that such old models need updating and are out of step with the modern world. Here, Collier is only taking issue with the narrowness of specialised academic knowledge, but as we have already seen, his comments may also be understood as reflective of a trend towards the wider commodification of academic knowledge production that is underway.

A fourth rhetorical strategy is that of confession, which may be used to confer moral authority on the writer's position and arguments. For example, for Thomas Dichter (2003, ix), the process of re-evaluation of his assumptions that led to him writing his book *Despite Good Intentions* was prompted by an apparently straightforward request for information from a member of his local community. At the start of the book, he explains:

My doubts became concrete a few years ago when my neighbours asked me for my "professional" opinion. They were starting to have considerable disposable income and wanted to contribute money to a good cause, preferably something that would help third world people. ... I could not give them the assurance that they wanted. I knew of no organisation that really accomplished much in the way of sustained alleviation of poverty ... I hemmed and hawed. Finally I told them I felt like a restaurant critic asked by good friends if he could get them in to see the kitchen of one of their favourite spots: "You don't want to know what goes on in there," I said, and left it at that.

It seems that what appeared on one level as a relatively straightforward question began to eat away at him, destabilising his professional equilibrium and ultimately leading him to reflect upon, and question, his identity as a development expert.

Stiglitz (2002, xv) offers more of a straightforward confessional in the form of an attempt to distance himself as far as possible from the conventions of traditional academic research, and his appeal to authority on the basis of 'witness':

This book is based on my experiences. There aren't nearly as many footnotes and citations as there would be in an academic paper. Indeed, I tried to describe the events I witnessed and tell some of the stories I heard ... Many of the people I criticize will say I have gotten it wrong; they may even produce evidence that contradicts my views of what happened. I can only offer my interpretation of what I saw.

This also resonates with work by Lillie Chouliaraki (2010) on the related role of witnessing in journalism as an 'act of disclosure', and as a means for engaging 'people's potential to care'.⁹ The blurb on the back of the Stiglitz paperback (presumably written not by the author but by the publishers) reinforces this idea of the power of witnessing:

Explosive and shocking, *Globalization and Its Discontents* is the bestselling expose of the all-powerful organizations that control our lives – from the man who has seen them at work first hand.

Another key feature of these blockbuster narratives is the power of testimony, which constitutes a fifth trope. Testimony is an idea related to that of witnessing, but brings the additional component of providing a statement of the *truth* of a matter. In the development blockbuster, it is common for authors to choose to try to ‘put the record straight’ as part of an account of their earlier experience. One prominent example of this is in Sach’s (2005, 137) *The End of Poverty* where, in the course of providing case studies of what he considers successful policy interventions, he also attempts to engage with critics of his earlier policy advice roles:

Many critics later accused me of peddling a ruthless form of free-market ideology in Russia. That was not the case. My main activity for two years was an unsuccessful attempt to mobilize international assistance to help cushion the inevitable hardships that would accompany Russia’s attempt to overcome the Soviet legacy.

For many of his critics, however, Sachs remains strongly associated with the disastrous market fundamentalist reforms in the form of ‘shock treatment’ that followed the immediate post-USSR era in Russia. As Thandika Mkandawire (2006, 4) suggests in his *Africa Review of Books* review of Sach’s book: ‘this is where Jeffrey Sachs is at his worst, as he attempts to burnish his role as economic advisor in places where the shock treatment went terribly wrong’. It would oversimplify to suggest that development blockbusters are each written to support a single neoliberal ideology, but in this case the dubious nature of the advice and argument becomes apparent.

Continuing with the religious theme, a sixth feature of the development blockbuster genre is the turning point or ‘epiphany’ – a key event or moment that leads the author to reevaluate what has come before and construct a new narrative. For Dichter (2003, ix), this was more of a slow turning point than a big-bang-type epiphany, where he began to realise that development work was not a pure moral realm for doing good, but a real world arena of competition and business that shared the ‘tainted’ characteristics of the many other less value-driven areas of human endeavour. The uncomfortable recognition of this basic truth that development work involved strong self-interest, and not just altruistic behaviour, became a growing source of discomfort:

In my naiveté I was not used to thinking of development assistance as an industry. I had for years genuinely believed that we could meaningfully help foster others’ development, and for me that meant we occupied a different realm of endeavour from commerce or government. The more I saw that we – the professionals and the organisations for which we work – behave as self-interestedly as any other industry or field and those in it, the more uncomfortable I became.

Here, the personal development and eventual turning point connects strongly with the basic contradictions of ‘the gift’ as simultaneously altruistic and self-interested, and embedded in the messy, mundane worlds of power, patronage and inequality (Stirrat and Henkel 1997).

For Maren (1997, 8), on the other hand, there was more of a sudden moment or epiphany one morning during a particularly difficult meeting in the NGO office. Here he experienced strong personal doubt about the nature of the professional development role he was playing:

I was having so much fun running around starting food-for-work projects – water projects, agriculture projects, forestry projects – that I completely overlooked the most obvious problem: I knew nothing about agriculture, forestry, road building, well digging, dam building, or any of the projects I was approving. But nobody seemed to care. Only once did anyone in authority at CRS ever go and look at a project... When I slowed down for a moment to consider what was happening, it became clear: Aid distribution is just another big, private business that relies on government contracts ... Since the securing of grant money is the primary goal, aid organizations rarely meet a development project they don't like. All of this came into focus one morning at an office meeting ...

Again, Maren is questioning his previous assumptions and knowledge. However, perhaps we can also recognise here that at the level of the text, this use of the epiphany is perhaps more of a stylistic device than an accurate representation of an autobiographical moment because it is difficult to believe that such insights can have been truly new to him.

Conclusion: development blockbusters as ‘gifts’ of professional wisdom

The emergence of the popular blockbuster as a genre of writing about development is one that has so far received very little attention, but, as I have argued here, it demands closer analysis. In particular, these books help to shape the changing forms of commodified expert knowledge being produced in and about international development. Their personalised style and form, while persuasive, are also as we have seen, double-edged in that they may lead to a simplification of complex issues in the spirit of providing useable, iconoclastic diagnoses and prescriptions. The stylistic devices deployed in these texts – including confession and epiphany - also lend weight to arguments that Western development discourses carry some of the characteristics of secular religion, for example focused on ‘conversion’ to capitalist development pathways, and the promise of a future ‘consumption paradise’ (Salemink 2004). Overall, the genre is characterised by a combination of personal wisdom and prescriptive development logic within a commercially-packaged genre that fits comfortably within the process of commodified knowledge production among the increasingly commercialised priorities of modern publishing.

The personalised form of transmission of this expert knowledge, with its elements of memoir, helps to legitimise it even though, as we have seen, there is an ambiguous power in personal narratives that make their content vulnerable to the flaws of self-justification. This is reinforced by the disguised form of the memoir, rendering its power as a commodity less visible while simultaneously making the product more attractive to consumers. The story of an author’s earlier professional life – and the hard lessons and gritty insights that have supposedly emerged from it – underpins the narrative. By living the challenges involved in development work at first hand, and by making mistakes and

experiencing epiphanies along the way, these professionals want readers to know that they have found out the hard way that long cherished beliefs now need to be questioned. These authors have done things, made mistakes, learned lessons precisely so that the readers themselves do not have to. In a convergence between the search by publishers for new products where development knowledge has been increasingly recognised as a commodity, and the need for development ideas and institutions to engage in a continuous process of renewal and adaptation, a new publishing niche promotes a form of professional expert knowledge that appears to serve the interests of both development agencies and commercial publishers. While development blockbusters present themselves as critiques of the mainstream, most nevertheless reinforce a pragmatic view of development ('whatever works', 'keep it simple', etc) that also neatly resonates with current neoliberal orthodoxies. Like the development gift itself, these books may present their authors' experiences in personalised and humanistic terms, but their effects ultimately serve to underpin the increasingly technocratic logic of international aid relationships.

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Notes

¹ The commercial blockbuster is a distinctive form of development writing, but there are, of course, other types of texts that offer critiques of development professionalism. In the anthropology of development, James Ferguson's (1990) work famously critiqued development interventions in terms of the 'anti-politics machine'. In the practitioner literature on development, Robert Chambers (1993) is critical of what he terms 'normal professionalism'.

² The idea of gifts of experience has been explored in the context of forms of exchange that take place within virtual online communities, where gift giving in the form of information or opinion is linked to status-seeking behaviour (Lampel and Bhalla, 2007).

³ It is difficult to know exactly who is reading these books. Certainly, they are read by international development professionals and are used as texts on university courses.

Reader comments on Amazon suggest a wide range of general readers as well, although the identities of those who write comments are difficult to judge. It is possible that, as was sometimes suggested of Stephen Hawking's *A Brief History of Time*, some of these books are bought for status, but seldom actually read. Further research would be needed to ascertain how the books are received by readers.

⁴ <http://williameasterly.org/books/authored-books/the-white-mans-burden/> (accessed October 14, 2013).

⁵ The 'misery memoir', a term believed to have been originally coined by *The Bookseller* magazine, has been described as a form of 'extreme confession' (Tim Adams ('Feel the pain', *The Observer* newspaper, January 29, 2006, <http://www.theguardian.com/books/2006/jan/29/biography.features> (accessed September 3, 2013).

⁶ A field is the bounded setting that locates social actors and their social positions (Bourdieu 1993).

⁷ <http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/reviews/the-wisdom-of-whores-by-elizabeth-pisani-823322.html> (accessed May 9, 2012).

⁸ Rendering the political technical through the construction of expert knowledge is a governmental effect of development that is discussed at length in the work of Tania Murray Li (2007).

⁹ The act of witnessing can be seen as one that is similar to confession, but associated with Protestant rather than Catholic traditions.

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