

Book Review

EASTERLY, W. (2014). THE TYRANNY OF EXPERTS: ECONOMISTS, DICTATORS, AND THE FORGOTTEN RIGHTS OF THE POOR. NEW YORK: BASIC BOOKS.

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The question of what can be done to end global poverty is one of the biggest quandaries currently plaguing international development, as well as the subject of William Easterly's "The Tyranny of Experts: Economists, Dictators, and the Forgotten Rights of the Poor." Easterly, the author of "The White Man's Burden: Why the West's Efforts to Aid the Rest Have Done So Much Ill and So Little Good," and New York University economist, wrote his new book for a wide audience. From development experts to university students, Easterly advises, "it is critical to get the principles of action right before acting." Explaining that is the task Easterly assigns to himself.

The book opens with an example that illustrates how theories of colonialism have over the years transformed into willful neglect. The author claims that in 2010, the homes and crops of about 20,000 farmers living in rural Ohio were burned down to make room for commercial forestry. But when the incident is revealed to have actually taken place in Uganda, Easterly forces the reader to confront their own prejudices. Should the reader feel relieved that it did not take place within her own nation? Is it more acceptable because it took place in Uganda?

These questions could be further extrapolated into a discussion regarding who owes assistance. But Easterly is far more concerned with the practical implications of these questions, examining the implementation of the West's promise to eradicate poverty. Ultimately, he aims to demonstrate that if the goal of the West is to eliminate global poverty then it must use a model of development based on ensuring individual rights of the global poor.

Since the beginning of the West's crusade against poverty in 1949, the general consensus has been that poverty is a technical problem that can be solved with technical solutions. Ensuring that the poor had access to material needs such as fertilizers, antibiotics, essential technologies, and nutritional supplements was a key step in the fight to end poverty. Easterly argues that this approach overlooks individual rights as demonstrated

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by past Western governments and organizations allowing dictators to deny basic rights to their people, under the guise of providing material needs.

Easterly attributes this trend of “development without rights” to the founding history of international development. While humanitarians in the United States and United Kingdom genuinely wanted to improve the lives of the poor, their version of assistance was formed while ideas of racism and colonialism still reigned supreme. Prejudice and ignorance led to failure in understanding the rights of the global poor. The blindness of said rights violations seeped into and influenced the technocratic solutions of modern day development work.

As a result, development work is not appropriately addressing the fundamental problem facing developing countries, lack of freedom. Easterly’s central claim is that even with large amounts of assistance, poverty will not be overcome until individual freedom exists. Of course, he is not the first to critique the methods of Western development. Yet his argument is a refreshing take on specifically why current methods are not working.

Easterly brings to light a previously overlooked dichotomy in the field of development: autocracy and freedom. Current development experts unintentionally support the former for the sake of technocratic development, whereas they should be supporting the latter and ensuring political and economic rights. Weaving together historical incidents ranging from twelfth-century Europe to the contemporary War on Terror, Easterly’s claim is ultimately very convincing.

But in a dichotomy, nuance is often lost. Returning to the introductory story of Ugandan farmers, Easterly showcases the West’s history of promoting autocrats. While Uganda’s ruler, Yoweri Museveni, is an autocrat, he had also assisted with the rebellion that overthrew the violent dictator Idi Amin. The nuances of legitimacy among autocratic regimes and even democratic regimes are often overlooked in Easterly’s bold arguments.

Other nuances lost in Easterly’s book are the numerous historical and cultural differences between Asian countries. After using examples from Europe to discuss the respective difference and significance of collectivism and individualism in economic growth, Easterly moves the discussion to “Asian Values”. In this one page section, he uses an anecdote about former Singapore Prime Minister, Lee Kuan Yew, to argue that Asian values are collectivist and autocratic. While Lee may have made the same argument, Easterly appears to take one idea and blindly apply it to an entire continent. This seems suspiciously similar to the idea of a Blank Slate, which he fervently argues against.

This is not to discredit the work as a whole. For the purpose of this book, Easterly’s unapologetic and straightforward approach is necessary. He is rebelling against years of the West’s attitude towards development. And yet, this is not a witch-hunt against economists in favor of supporting autocrats for the sake of development. Easterly admits that

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this support is often unintentional and he himself was once a believer in the technocratic approach.

This reformed technocrat overturns the conventional wisdom currently plaguing global economic development. By highlighting the obvious need for political and economic rights, he shows that technocratic assistance merely addresses the symptoms of poverty. Building and supporting institutions that protect these rights will undoubtedly take a considerable amount of effort and time. But Easterly is optimistic, leaving us with the quote, “This book does *not* say that nothing good will happen until some utopian ideals on rights are attained. No, this book argues the opposite: an incremental positive change in freedom will yield a positive change in well-being for the world’s poor. These incremental changes are already happening.” And with the substantial insights of this book, they will continue to do so.

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