

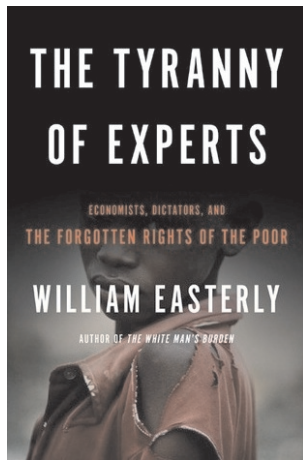
## Book Review

# Development Without Representation

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William Easterly, *The Tyranny of Experts: Economists, Dictators, and the Forgotten Rights of the Poor*, New York, NY: Basic Books, 2014, 416 pp., \$19.35 (hardcover).



During my early forays into ICT for development, a colleague recommended that I read William Easterly's *The Elusive Quest for Growth*. It was eye-opening. I loved its irreverent tone and unsparing analysis of development trends. Easterly shot arrows at the policies of the World Bank—his employer at the time—and soon after the book's publication, he was famously asked to resign.

Today, Easterly is an economics professor at New York University, where he continues his critique of foreign aid without threat of unemployment. And a good thing, too, for those of us who seek honest reflection in development. Before Paul Collier's *The Bottom Billion*, Dambisa Moyo's *Dead Aid*, or any number of recent blogs that look askance at the project of foreign aid, there was William Easterly.

*The Tyranny of Experts* is his latest book, and it will delight long-time fans as well as people new to Easterly's thinking. Those familiar with his work will appreciate another insightful dose of development criticism with new stories, new research, and little-known history. Others will be introduced to his icono-

clastic takedowns of those who pull the levers of foreign aid. I recommend the book particularly to those who have the power to write checks with many zeroes. They'll see how minor decisions made on behalf of their convenience often aggravate the very challenges they are seeking to address. At the same time, the book is not without its flaws—though Easterly is wonderfully pointed and original as a critic, his proposed principles of action seem to revert to conventionally misguided policies.

Several themes run through all of Easterly's books, and *Tyranny* develops and expands on them. The core theses of his first book, *Elusive Quest*, were that "there are no magical elixirs" (Easterly, 2002, p. 289) to socio-economic development and that "people respond to incentives" (Ibid., 2002, p. 38). That was 2001. Five years later, Easterly advanced those themes in *The White Man's Burden*, which divided development activists into misguided Planners and problem-solving Searchers. Planners tend to favor magical elixirs and prescribe them top-down, while Searchers build incremental solutions bottom-up, responding to input from the people they are trying to serve. In *Burden*, Easterly also urged that development efforts be focused on individuals rather than nations or governments, and he explicitly called out the combination of free markets and democracy as an environment in which Searchers thrived.

The attack on these fronts continues in *The Tyranny of Experts*. Magical elixirs are again criticized, but this time under the labels of "technical solutions" and "technocracy," the latter being the rule of experts of the title. But whereas previously Easterly highlighted how technocratic approaches were merely ineffective, in *Tyranny*, he goes further to criticize "the implicit vision in development today . . . of well-intentioned autocrats advised by technical experts" (Easterly, 2014, p. 6). His primary complaint is that a certain class of "development expert" ends up supporting abusive power structures in order to implement their (often misguided)

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technocratic solutions. The alternative, Easterly suggests, is to stress individual economic and political rights, and he makes this point more strenuously than he has ever done before.

In Part 1 of the book, Easterly sets up the two winners of the 1974 Nobel Prize in Economics—Gunnar Myrdal and Friedrich Hayek—as opposite poles that frame his thesis. According to Easterly, they disagreed on three issues relevant to development: First, whether nations are blank slates on which arbitrary policy can be imposed or the results of unique histories that require incremental, case-by-case approaches; second, whether the unit of development is nations or individuals; and third, whether development is achieved by top-down conscious design or by bottom-up spontaneous solutions. Myrdal tended toward the first of each of these pairs, while Hayek tended toward the second. Easterly sides with Hayek, who believed that nations and their economies were too complex for effective central planning. (Easterly is careful to point out that Hayek was not the rabid antigovernment libertarian that the American right wing pretends he was; Hayek believed in some government social services.) The presentation is a little unfair to Myrdal, who is made out to be a rigidly authoritarian technocrat, even though he was, for example, sensitive to the dangers of supporting corrupt leaders with foreign aid. Nevertheless, the caricatured Myrdal–Hayek dynamic is effective as a map for the rest of the book.

Part 2 considers the early history of modern international development on three continents: Asia, Africa, and Latin America. In each case, Easterly shows how the United States and Western European powers repeatedly sought self-serving outcomes, all while supporting autocrats who claimed to implement value-neutral technocratic solutions for their people. This is familiar terrain for scholars of development studies, but Easterly reveals some astonishing history. For example, he notes a clause in the World Bank's 1944 Articles of Agreement that should appear in any Top 10 list of the world's greatest hypocrisies. It states, "The Bank and its officers shall not interfere in the political affairs of any member" (World Bank, 2012). Even today, this clause apparently prohibits World Bank officials from mentioning the word *democracy* in reports and speeches, yet the idea of the World Bank being apolitical is laughable. Its 12 presidents so far have all been American, and its policies lean decidedly neoliberal.

Parts 3, 4, and 5 each consider the three dichotomies set up by Myrdal versus Hayek. Part 3 is about whether countries are blank slates or products of a long history. Economist Guido Tabellini, for example, has found that third-generation Americans whose great-grandparents emigrated from autocratic countries have lower levels of trust in others than their peers whose ancestors came from more democratic countries—and this though both groups were born and raised under the same U.S. laws and institutions. As anthropologists have long known, culture is sticky. Easterly marshals this kind of evidence to imply that autocratic governments lead to persistent social norms that inhibit free-market economic growth, which in turn supports autocracy. Easterly argues convincingly that history matters, and matters deeply, to development.

In Part 4, Easterly argues against a focus on nations as the unit of economic development. Instead, he prefers that we focus on individuals or households. Migration, for example, is something that helps individual households (e.g., through better-paying jobs) but which nations try to inhibit (e.g., through visa and work restrictions). These chapters are somewhat glib, but they offer food for thought as well as classic Easterly gems. Why, for example, is it that nations are so often the unit of intervention? Easterly's answer: "[I]t is convenient for the development experts whose only plausible counterparts are national government representatives" (Easterly, 2014, p. 200).

Finally, Part 5 wraps up in well-established Easterly territory. In chapters each on markets and technology, Easterly reprises the case he made in *White Man's Burden*: that the best way to achieve development is not to impose solutions from above, but to encourage spontaneous problem-solving. Here is Easterly's zinger about top-down ICT projects: "They promised to end poverty with broadband and they gave us young men watching porn" (ibid., p. 276). Instead, he emphasizes the importance of countries developing their own capacity to build or invent technologies as needed.

Also in these chapters is a concise summary of Easterly's thinking:

Having experts in charge of solving society's problems turns things over to agents who face neither a market test nor a democratic test. If they get [things] wrong, they suffer neither economic nor political penalties. If

their solutions should happen to work, they get neither economic nor political rewards. So there is nothing to spur them on to scaling up successes any more than there is anything to motivate them to kill off failures. (ibid., p. 254)

Indeed, *Tyranny* opens with the harrowing tale of an agrarian community in Uganda that was forced off its land at gunpoint by a World Bank-funded forestry project designed to generate income through timber. Four years later, 20,000 people are still without access to their land. Easterly notes wryly, "The World Bank is not subject to [Ugandan] law or courts" (ibid., p. 3). In other words, what Easterly is raging against is what could be called *development without representation*.

So, what's the solution? This is where the book is weakest. To be fair to Easterly, he says up front that he is not providing "a how-to manual for aid workers and philanthropists" (ibid., p. 15), and he avoids facile recommendations. Nevertheless, throughout the book, he champions "individual rights," by which he means a well-regulated, well-run, free-market democracy. (I recently had lunch with Easterly, and he said that he intentionally demurs from using the phrase "free-market democracy" because of the baggage it carries in American politics. Nevertheless, he agreed that that's approximately what he means by individual rights. Incidentally, Easterly did not have the strident tone of his books in person; he was unexpectedly soft-spoken and gentle.) In contrast to the World Bank's extrajudicial approach, in a free-market democracy political leaders are accountable to citizens through votes, and firms are accountable to consumers through dollars.

But, how do we reach a world where everyone's individual rights are respected? In one of the few explicit recommendations that Easterly makes, he writes that countries should "escape whenever [they] can" (ibid., p. 153) from autocracy and bad values. This echoes U.S. foreign policy's fixation on bringing about liberal democracy. But, rushing to liberal democracy as a foregone conclusion without respecting history or process seems to be exactly the type of blank-slate approach that Easterly condemned in Part 3. Even America was ruled by a monarch prior to its Declaration of Independence. Is it possible that dictatorship is a necessary step in the evolution of nations to democracy (and beyond)?

Easterly would loathe the idea. One thing he decries is any admiration of the world's Strong Men. He is not impressed with China, Rwanda, or Singapore. And, he takes issue with Tony Blair's and Bill Gates' praise of Ethiopia's late autocrat, Meles Zenawi, for the country's advances in health. In fact, Easterly seems to hate even the very possibility of a benevolent autocrat. In the penultimate chapter, he does some high-flying mental acrobatics to discredit the psychology of anyone who thinks well of benevolent dictators. Those pages caused me to think that the gentleman doth protest too much.

Of course, there are plenty of terrible despots, but good autocrats are not entirely unheard of. History's well-loved rulers—King David, Ashoka, Wen of Han, Marcus Aurelius, Ieyasu Tokugawa, Catherine the Great, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, Lee Kuan Yew—all reigned over periods of relative peace and prosperity. Meanwhile, democracies are not above severe rights violations. The United States, after all, spies on emails, executes its own citizens without trial, and remains unable to extend basic healthcare to all its citizens.

None of this is to say, of course, that autocracy is preferable to democracy. Autocracies are vulnerable to a single point of misbehavior. But if Easterly's main issue is development without representation, then the problem would seem to be not the type of government as much as its responsiveness to citizens. Government responsiveness, not the legal institutions of democracy, would seem to be what matters most.

If so, the questions are not "Are dictatorships *per se* bad?" but "How can they be made more responsive?" and "When are they ripe for a healthy transition to democracy?" What meaningful incentive would cause a person with absolute power to give it up? What is the right time for citizens to march in protest? And how can we ensure that the ensuing government is responsive to its people? I sympathize with Blair and Gates, who were no doubt trying to influence a flawed autocrat in Ethiopia by praising the positive intentions he acted on, much like a parent might praise a delinquent teenager for not smoking in the house. (On the other hand, Easterly could have had a field day with the Gates Foundation's technocratic approach to development.)

Ultimately, Easterly is at his best as a critic, and *Tyranny's* most memorable sound bite might be this: "The technocratic illusion is that poverty results from a shortage of expertise, whereas poverty is really about a

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shortage of rights" (ibid., p. 7). He is undoubtedly correct. As to how we increase the rights of the world's poor people, however, America's own high rate of poverty suggests that even free-market democracy is not the final answer.

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