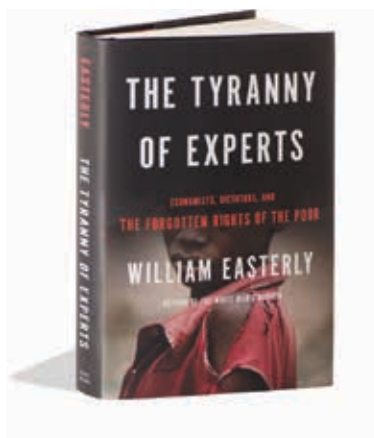


## Development by Way of Rights



William Easterly

### The Tyranny of Experts

Basic Books, New York, 2013, 416 pp., \$29.99 (cloth).

I loved the premise and conclusions of William Easterly's new book. The intervening 300 pages gave less cause for celebration.

Easterly sees development as hijacked by technocrats: "The technocratic illusion is that poverty results from a shortage of expertise, whereas poverty is really about a shortage of rights." The founding of the World Bank is the moment of original sin (the IMF gets off lightly). The resulting polemic is sweetly written, packed with fascinating human interest stories to bring alive what could have been dry conceptual debates.

For Easterly, the individual is hero, either unleashed to transform the world or confounded by the malignity of politicians. It is a quintessentially American, even Hollywood, take on the human condition. His view of power is summed up in the title of the chapter on institutions: "We oppress them if we can."

Easterly's gurus are Adam Smith and Friedrich Hayek; he reserves his scorn for development economists like Gunnar Myrdal and W. Arthur Lewis, who created a special economics that discarded free choice and individualism.

The book contains thought-provoking accounts of the origins of the technocratic approach, which

Easterly dates to 1919 (not Truman's 1949 speech, customarily cited as the dawn of aid). He sees it as rooted in attempts to divert attention *away* from the rights agenda, whether over U.S. anti-Chinese discrimination in the 1920s and 30s, Britain's attempts to resist postwar decolonization, or the struggles over civil rights in the 1950s and 60s. He traces a direct lineage to more recent wars (Cold; on Terror; on Drugs), where a focus on technocratic development enabled a convenient blind eye to be turned when rights violators lined up on the West's side.

This readiness to forget rights was music to the ears of dictators of all stripes, who grabbed the planner approach (or at least its language) as a way to ignore the opposition and consolidate their own economic and political power. He sees this abandonment of individual rights as the "moral tragedy of development today."

There is much to agree with here: his criticism of the blank slate approach, which ignores national and local specificities; the abuse of individual rights in the name of some higher national purpose; and the efficacy of spontaneous solutions rather than conscious design (neatly equating planners with anti-evolutionists).

Easterly even comes out as a growth skeptic: "If there is one number to which the rights of millions will be happily sacrificed, it is the national GDP growth rate."

But his argument founders on the China (or more broadly east Asia) question. Confronted with the historic reality that high-speed growth in east Asia has taken place under a variety of autocratic systems (the so-called developmental states), advocates of the American Dream confront two options: either accept that there may be trade-offs between growth and rights or try to explain away the east Asian miracle as a triumph for individual rights and market forces.

The World Bank attempted the latter with its much-derided East Asian Miracle of 1993, but Easterly makes that exercise in spin look positively

timid: "There is more evidence for attributing the rise of China as an economic superpower to the anonymous spread of the potato than to Deng Xiaoping's economic policies." This is desperate stuff.

By entering the terrain of rights, he expands on his earlier book, *The White Man's Burden*, which put forward a distinction between searchers and planners—a dichotomy I have found very useful over the years. But his grasp of rights is selective and flawed. For Easterly, rights are always individual, never collective—no mention of trade unions, women's or indigenous movements, or producer organizations.

Moreover, this portrayal of heroic individuals struggling for rights

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draws extensively on U.S. history, but completely ignores the institution that in recent years has done more than any other to promote human rights: the United Nations. That those contemptible planners and bureaucrats in New York should be advancing rights for all sorts of marginalized groups around the world clearly contradicts the premise, so they must be airbrushed out of the picture.

Finally, Easterly's conclusion is that if you care about rights, you should oppose aid. Mine is the opposite. Done well, aid can support poor people's struggles (individual and collective) for their rights, something I have seen firsthand in numerous countries in my work for Oxfam.

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