One standard definition of “international development” is that it is the global effort by rich and poor countries alike, working in tandem, to dramatically reduce extreme poverty and want. At the same time, such development should foster the economic growth of poor countries so that they will eventually be able to catch up with rich ones. Then they will share what Walt W. Rostow, the intellectual father of the so-called modernization theory that dominated the Western development world in the 1950s, called the promise of abundance. It is that promise, or, more exactly, the claim that such a promise could ever have been fulfilled by applying any of the theories that have dominated the development
world since its inception, that is sharply challenged as false by the economist William Easterly in his new book, *The Tyranny of Experts*.

From the vantage point of 2014, international development is rightly seen as one of the organizing principles and central moral commitments of the age. What nonspecialists generally do not realize is that although its antecedents go much further back, development as we now conceive of it is comparatively new. Along with the human rights movement, it is part of what Michael Ignatieff has referred to as the “revolution of moral concern” that took place in the aftermath of World War II. Indeed, the birth of the development age is commonly identified as having been heralded in President Truman’s 1949 inaugural address, in which he announced “a bold new program for making the benefits of our scientific advances and industrial progress available for the improvement and growth of underdeveloped areas.”

Scholars quarrel over the extent to which the set of initiatives Truman announced in that speech, which came to be known as “Point Four,” reflected the idealistic hopes that had underpinned the founding of the United Nations, and the extent to which Truman was attempting to counter what, in the wake of the Communist triumph in China, the historian Nick Cullather has called “the ‘discovery’ of mass poverty as a global strategic problem,” or as one prescient American official put it at the time, “wherever hunger goes, Communism follows.”¹ In this conventional account, the development project globally was also the product of the end of colonialism and of the perceived need, which, again, was the result both of moral and geostrategic imperatives, to find a way to help newly or soon-to-be-independent states escape the desperate poverty in which they were mired, poverty that, as Truman put it, was “a handicap and a threat to them and to more prosperous areas.”

Whatever the original motivations, since 1949, development rapidly evolved from being basically a Western—and, more specifically, an American—idea into what the Swiss scholar Gilbert Rist, a fierce critic of development from the left, has described as a “global faith” that changed the course of history.² That faith reflected a consensus view generally accepted by scholars and practitioners who see the development project as a moral and geoeconomic necessity, and at the very least judge it a qualified success, and who vastly outnumber their discipline’s detractors. Some of those detractors, like Rist and the Canadian scholar Colin Leys, come from the left. Others can be counted among those who, though it would be unfair to pigeonhole them as being on the right, unquestionably have more confidence in free markets than they do in any of the development theories that have dominated the profession since its inception.

William Easterly, a former World Bank economist who combines theoretical sophistication with enormous field experience, and who now codirects the Development Research Institute at NYU, is one of the most distinguished and most outspoken of these free-market critics of development as it has been practiced from Truman’s day to the present. In 2006, Easterly published *The White Man’s Burden: Why the West’s Efforts to Aid the Rest Have Done So Much Ill and So Little Good*. In that book, he argued that international development aid has not only failed since its inception to deliver on its promises, but is actually a trap for the world’s poor, whom he sees as the victims of those he calls “planners,” who think they can act as the arbiters of what the poor need and imperiously “determine what to supply.” Easterly’s alternative is a radical one. “The right plan,” he writes, “is to have no plan.” Thus, were the development project to be radically overhauled in the way Easterly is convinced it needs to be, the planners would be replaced by those he calls “searchers,” who are committed to “find[ing] out what is in demand.”

In *The Tyranny of Experts: Economists, Dictators, and the Forgotten Rights of the Poor*, Easterly presents an angrier and still more radical statement of this thesis. Taking as his point of departure what, within the development world at least, is the not particularly controversial claim that the development project predates Truman’s “Point Four” by decades, Easterly goes on to elaborate with great brio and authority the view, widely espoused on the left but with little purchase elsewhere, that development was historically a centerpiece of a concerted response by the European imperial powers. Confronted during the interwar period by the ever-growing demands of their colonial subjects, first for political rights and finally for independence, they tried to find new justifications for their empires.
Easterly focuses particularly on the efforts of Lord Hailey, whose monumental Africa survey for the British Colonial Office in 1938, he argues, “offered an excuse to postpone indefinitely any native demands for political rights” on grounds that only the colonial administration had the technocratic skills needed to bring social and economic progress. As Easterly notes, Hailey was even more explicit in a speech he titled “A New Philosophy of Colonial Rule,” delivered to the Royal Empire Society in 1941, and more explicit still the following year, when he declared that the maintenance of the British Empire was justified because it had joined the “movement for the betterment of the backward peoples of the world.”

Taken on its own, Easterly’s delving into this history may seem irrelevant to the global development project as it now exists. In much (though not of course all) of the formerly colonized world even the memories of European imperial rule are fading fast, and if anything (though the left would not agree) the reigning ideology of the development world is more “third worldist” than it is “imperialist.” But in fact, the record of imperial power is essential to Easterly’s argument, which is that from the colonial period to the present day there has been a historical continuity of attitudes that can be summed up as combining an excessive focus on technocratic solutions with a “concomitant blindness” to human rights.

For him, the violators of these rights include both the colonial authorities and the “indigenous autocrats” who too often succeeded them. Of course they also include the principal targets of Easterly’s book—policymakers, development economists, and campaigners within the United Nations system, the Bretton Woods institutions, donor governments in rich countries, and their official aid agencies such as USAID in the US that are charged with disbursing what has come to be known as Official Development Assistance. Another main target of Easterly’s ire is the private philanthropies that have become increasingly influential in shaping global development policy—above all the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation.

Easterly’s indictment of these institutions can be divided into two parts. The first reflects his outrage over their seemingly limitless willingness to offer unquestioning support to corrupt and autocratic regimes such as those now running Ethiopia and Uganda. Here, Easterly is on solid ground. Ethiopia is a case in point, and one that he rightly emphasizes. It has for some time been a poster child for successful development. Admirers in the development world, most notably Bill and Melinda Gates, but also senior officials at the World Bank, among others, point to the country’s success in rapidly reducing tragically high rates of child mortality. In 2012, Bill Gates praised Ethiopia’s then prime minister, Meles Zenawi, and his “leadership team.” What Ethiopia was doing in health, Gates wrote, was “really a model system because it reaches everyone in the country.”

In 2013, Melinda Gates, on the eve of a trip to Ethiopia, described it as one of her favorite countries. “I always enjoy visiting Ethiopia,” she declared, “because I see inspirational stories and concrete leadership from the government and community health workers reaching the hardest to reach and making change.” Easterly quotes a 2013 report by Tony Blair’s Africa Governance Initiative praising the Ethiopian government’s “strong, accountable leadership in implementing the plan.”

Strong, certainly; accountable, certainly not. According to Human Rights Watch’s 2014 country report, “Ethiopia’s ambitious development schemes, funded from domestic revenue sources and foreign assistance, sometimes displace indigenous communities without appropriate consultation or any compensation.” And after describing in detail the government’s imprisonment of nonviolent opposition leaders and journalists, and denial of the right to assembly, among many other violations of human rights, the report notes that while Ethiopia receives donor assistance of almost $4 billion a year,

as partners in Ethiopia’s development, donor nations remain muted in their criticism of Ethiopia’s appalling human rights record and are taking little meaningful action to investigate allegations of abuses associated with development programs.
It is one of the great merits of Easterly’s book that he documents in great and convincing detail the tyrannical and repressive record not just of Ethiopia but of other regimes that have long been and remain the darlings of the development world. In doing so, he uncovers some extraordinary facts, such as that the World Bank is, by its own account, not legally allowed by its charter to use the word “democracy.” That the bank is committed to carrying out its slogan, “Working for a world free of poverty,” is not in doubt.

But, Easterly charges, it has been blindly trying to do so without thinking through the relation of successful and sustainable development, not just to what it calls “implementing the strengthened approach to governance,” but to the relation between development and democracy, and development and individual rights. As he notes acidly, “the following concepts play little or no role in the ‘strengthened approach to governance’: liberty, freedom, equality, rights, or democracy.” And the same can be said about the Gates Foundation and many of the other powerful institutions, whether international, national, or philanthropic, that currently set the global development agenda.

If we assume this is right, the question is why. Easterly’s preferred explanation is that from its inception, the development project took the wrong path, choosing authoritarian rather than democratic development, investing its hopes as well as its money in autocrats advised by technocrats to provide centrally planned solutions, and ignoring the promise of the ingenuity and knowledge of free individuals and the spontaneous solutions they could have provided. Reflecting on the history of development since its inception, Easterly writes angrily that “the Tyranny of Experts defeated the rights of the poor,” adding, “it did not deserve to win.”

But is he right in identifying the “original sin” of the development project as its refusal to acknowledge, let alone learn from, “the historical success of a free society in solving poverty and child mortality”? More broadly, is he right when he asserts categorically that “however benevolent an autocrat may appear for the moment, unrestrained power will always turn out to be the enemy of development”?

Easterly is a fine polemicist, but here his rhetoric gets the better of him. Are growth-minded autocrats really always the enemy of development? Or, as he insists elsewhere, have Western governments and development agencies “trampled” on the rights of the poor by failing to make human rights the most important priority of their global development efforts? In the former case, the fine old Scottish verdict “Not Proven” would seem closer to the mark. Easterly himself concedes that Lee Kuan Yew, the very authoritarian founding leader of independent Singapore, did indeed preside over extraordinary economic growth in his country. And there are other important examples, as Easterly knows perfectly well, such as South Korea, Vietnam, and of course China. But he believes that for every Lee Kuan Yew there are brutal dictators and economically inept dictators like Robert Mugabe in Zimbabwe or André Kolingba in the Central African Republic, and that if one averages this out globally, “the growth advantage is with democrats.”

Easterly may well be correct, but even assuming he is, this hardly justifies his claim that over the long term autocracy and successful economic growth and poverty reduction can never go hand in hand. And concerning Western governments trampling on the rights of the poor, there too Easterly inflates an argument with considerable validity into one so extreme, and, worse, so deterministic, that even the most sympathetic and human rights–supporting reader is likely to wonder if this isn’t far too broad a claim, one that imputes far too much power and influence to Western donors.

For better or worse, one of the most significant, and to many in the West surprising, developments of the past two decades has been the reemergence of powerful states in the global south, not just the world-straddling new economic powers such as China, India, and Brazil, but also smaller states such as Rwanda, Sri Lanka, and Vietnam, with far less economic weight but with strong and determined autocratic leaders. And as many Western diplomats and human rights campaigners will say privately, the emergence of China as a force both in Africa through trade, loans, and grants and in Central Asia—partly through the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, partly bilaterally—has made it much more difficult for Western governments to successfully attach human rights conditions to the development aid they grant to poor countries. Instead, the autocratic leaders of these states can turn to Beijing, which is unlikely to attach any human
rights conditions at all save for trade concessions. The days are long gone when one could divide the world neatly into “the West and the Rest.” This certainly does not mean that human rights violations anywhere should not be strongly opposed but that the task of doing so successfully is far harder now.

It is disappointing that an economist of Easterly’s stature and accomplishment, a writer who over the course of his career has been so rightly critical of simplistic schemes for progress when it comes to economic development, is himself so susceptible to an equally simple one with regard to the spread of democracy across the globe.

Disappointing but not surprising. For in *The Tyranny of Experts*, Easterly relies heavily—in my view far too heavily—on the work of Friedrich Hayek. Indeed, the second chapter of his book, “Two Nobel Laureates and the Debate They Never Had,” counterposes Hayek’s views on economic development with those of Gunnar Myrdal, whose magisterial three-volume study, *Asian Drama: An Inquiry into the Poverty of Nations*, published in 1968, had a profound influence—as Easterly concedes ruefully, a far greater one than Hayek’s—on the thinking of several generations of development economists.

Myrdal and Hayek disagreed deeply on many things, and Easterly lays out in great detail their disagreements on how societies are most likely to emerge from poverty. He is a bit unfair to Myrdal, but while he exaggerates the Swedish economist’s authoritarian impulses, on balance his portrait is a defensible one. According to Easterly, Myrdal cared little for individual rights or the development of democratic institutions and a great deal for the prerogatives of nations, and never deviated from his unyielding commitment to central, top-down economic planning.

In contrast, Hayek is presented as having believed in spontaneous solutions rather than central planning, and Easterly portrays him as the champion of “individual rights in development” as both “an end in and of themselves and the means by which societies escape poverty and move into prosperity.” This portrait too is on balance defensible, even if Easterly glosses over Hayek’s extremely peculiar ideas about democracy, including his proposal that legislatures should be composed of lawmakers who would be elected to a sole fifteen-year term by voters who would exercise their suffrage only once, at the age of forty-five.

Seeing Hayek at least partly through rose-colored glasses and Myrdal in the harshest possible light may help explain, but still does not justify, Easterly’s presentation of the former as having been completely right and the latter completely wrong. No does it justify the charge that if only the development establishment had listened to Hayek, development would have sided with freedom rather than autocracy, and as a result would have been a success rather than the failure Easterly believes it largely to be.

Moreover, Easterly uses one urban example again and again to illustrate how the West attained liberty and prosperity while the development project denied these same possibilities and right to the Rest. That example traces the transformation of one street in the SoHo neighborhood of Lower Manhattan. This is baffling. Easterly extols Greene Street’s “total freedom to keep reinventing itself,” calling attention, for example, to the rising prosperity of many of its residents, and to its resistance to “technocratic officials” such as Robert Moses who would have demolished it. He appears to believe that such freedom is what in the long run guaranteed America’s prosperity. In light of this, it makes sense that for him the great moral solecism of the development world has been its refusal to engage with the reality of this exercise of freedom.

But why should the history of Greene Street be thought a decisive example? Easterly may claim that “the value of the block in the long run was simply the freedom to be whatever its residents and customers wanted it to be,” but on his own evidence this is at best only partly true. During the Depression, for example, the wishes of the residents (there were no customers: that Greene Street block was an encampment for the homeless) made no difference to the street whatever. It is all very well for Easterly to talk about the present era being “the climactic phase of the Greene Street story,” but why
should this be so? In a hundred years, perhaps it will be a homeless encampment again. And it is only the narcissism of
the living that could possibly justify Easterly’s decision to treat Greene Street’s current state as its end state. As Joan
Robinson, whose criticisms of Hayek are well worth reading, once remarked, “In the long run, we are simply in another
short run.”

Of course, believing that America’s present is the world’s future is an old American conceit. But even allowing for that,
here Easterly’s good sense once more falls victim to his sermonizing. As someone who has devoted his career to
thinking about how to improve the lives of the poor, it is almost bizarre to find Easterly insisting that Greene Street is
what it is because that is what its residents wanted it to be, while denying, as surely he would do without reservation,
that the residents of Detroit or East St. Louis or Camden, New Jersey, want their poor and broken-down cities to be as
they are.

The history of development, far from being as seamless as Easterly argues it has been, is actually the story of boom and
bust. There have been moments when it seemed that the methods that would durably reduce poverty were at last in
place; and such moments were followed by pessimism about what could be done after the apparent failure of particular
economic strategies. Were the development world a human being, one might describe that person as having been prey to
a lifetime of extraordinary mood swings.

At present, that world is experiencing a period of unprecedented optimism about the efficacy of aid, whether it is
expressed by Jeffrey Sachs in his book The End of Poverty or the president of the World Bank, Dr. Jim Yong Kim, also
predicting the end of poverty, or Bill Gates echoing this view by writing in his 2014 foundation letter that the world can
“solve extreme poverty and disease,” and predicting that “by 2035, there will be almost no poor countries left in the
world.” There is also the Scaling Up Nutrition movement, and the welter of NGOs associated with it, asserting that it
will not be too long before hunger and malnutrition and undernutrition will be artifacts of humanity’s suffering past. It is
easy to get the impression that the development world believes itself to be in its end times, or, at the very least, at the
End of History.

Part of the reason for this optimism is the very real reductions in poverty and hunger that have occurred throughout the
world during the past thirty years, even if the largest part of these, as Easterly has tried repeatedly to point out, are due to
the rise of middle classes in China and India rather than to the development project in any of its historic versions. For
Jeffrey Sachs or Bill Gates, technocratic solutions have not failed. To the contrary, in their view, despite many setbacks,
on balance they have been succeeding brilliantly and will likely be even more successful in the future. Unsurprisingly,
given Gates’s influence, in this they partly mirror the techno-utopian views that are so commonplace in Silicon Valley
and the rest of the high-tech world and, at least arguably, some of its autocratic character as well. It is in this setting that
Easterly’s passionate, brilliant, but also wildly over-the-top dissent from the reigning consensus needs to be understood.

1 Nick Cullather’s The Hungry World: America’s Cold War Battle Against Poverty in Asia (Harvard University Press, 2010) is a brilliant history of the politics of US food aid during the cold
war, focusing above all on the ideological underpinnings of its centerpiece, the Green Revolution in agriculture of the 1960s and 1970s in Asia.  

2 Gilbert Rist’s The History of Development: From Western Origins to Global Faith (Zed, 1997) is, to date, the most consequential and scholarly critique from the left of the development
project.  

3 Easterly restricts his focus to the British Empire, but in many ways the views he describes can just as easily be applied to France, which had always justified its imperial role by way of the
mission civilisatrice, the civilizing mission, that it claimed as the moral warrant for the open-ended maintenance of its colonial rule.  

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