

Response to reviewers on “The Tyranny of Experts”

William Easterly¹

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Abstract I respond to the three excellent reviewers, who have covered well some of the most difficult issues raised by the arguments in *The Tyranny of Experts*. These include the good intentions of aid officials supporting autocrats, the role of Western history and current Western travails in the debate on freedom, distinguishing good and bad experts, advocating principles vs. tangible interventions, the serious flaws of democracy and not overstating the case for democracy, the question of whether some academics are also technocrats, the value of freedom as an end in itself, and the definition of democracy as to whether it includes individual rights. Finally and most controversially, I address the biggest question raised by the reviewers (and many others): what should we do? I say why I believe this question is the wrong one, why I refuse to answer it, and suggest more constructive ways to debate freedom and development.

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I thank very much the reviewers for their careful reading and thoughtful comments and questions. The reviewers have a great balance of positive affirmation with skeptical questioning, which facilitates the kind of ongoing debate that is so valuable.

I suspect most of the time the reviewers and I are in agreement, but I will exploit any apparent disagreement to discuss important issues the reviewers have raised. At times, I will also go somewhat beyond even what the reviewers are questioning or asking. This is the first time I have had any written response to all the other reviews and live audience questions since the book was published over a year ago, and some themes that the reviewers stress also have appeared in some form elsewhere. (This may make some

✉ William Easterly
william.easterly@nyu.edu

¹ New York University, 19 West 4th Street, 6th Floor, New York, NY 1002, USA

of my answers seem like overkill on the reviewers' original comment or query.) Again I thank the reviewers for making this possible.

1. The unintentional equilibrium of self-censoring debate

Lomasky raises an important objection to the critique of development experts:

Easterly seems genuinely disturbed by words of praise lavished on global miscreants such as Ethiopia's Meles Zenawi (156–158) and Rwanda's Paul Kagame (275) by World Bank presidents (327) and philanthropic billionaires (123), but I don't see any reason to take their words as other than the diplomatic politesse that is required to facilitate engagement with one's interlocutors.

{I do not} have any reason to doubt that many people in the aid industry are repelled by the brutishness of those with whom they have to work if they are going to be allowed to ply their craft. Their preference *for* development overrides their sentiments *against* autocracy. Therefore they hold their tongues and plow ahead with those tasks for which they have received sanction from the local kleptocrats and jailers.

Deaton raises similar concerns:

It is also in the context of health improvement that those of us who argue against having truck with tyrants face the gravest difficulties. Do we argue against aid for health—vaccinations, anti-retroviral therapies, or help in running a health system—on the grounds that the recipient government is insufficiently democratic?

Deaton wrestles thoughtfully with this dilemma, considering that well-meaning people could indeed go for the option of putting up with autocrats in order to deliver aid for health.

I would still affirm the critique of the Tyranny of Experts. The debate must make clear that aid and development are not the same.

Suppose just for the sake of argument that aid could work to alleviate suffering even in an autocratic environment. Even so, the difference between aid and development is that aid is targeted to smaller problems and smaller groups of people than what could possibly transform a whole society – i.e., development. Even if aid were effective at small things – again for the sake of argument – it is simply too tiny and too hamstrung by its internal problems of unaccountability (and too unsustainable after the outsiders go away) in most cases to conceivably be an engine of development.

However we think of aid, the Tyranny of Experts insisted its subject is NOT aid, it is development, if the reader will only acknowledge that there could be a big difference.

The problem described as “the Tyranny of Experts” arises because aid actors are also some of the biggest participants in the development debate (in part because they themselves usually do NOT distinguish between aid and development). Lomasky points out that aid actors need to censor themselves to work in autocratic countries. Even if we granted them that need for self-censorship, the problem is that these same

people self-censoring themselves are major participants in the international debates on autocracy and development – so this debate is excessively censored on the subject of individual rights. An aid actor praising an autocrat in order to deliver aid is unintentionally promoting the autocratic side of the debate on democracy in development.

I should make more effort to acknowledge and praise the good intentions, hard work, and altruistic commitment of many members of this group called here “development experts.” They are operating in a system whose operating rules they cannot control, and doing their heroic best under trying circumstances. I salute them. The “Tyranny of Experts” is one of those accidental general equilibrium outcomes that no one expert intended. This equilibrium does NOT occur because individual experts necessarily or usually have tyrannical tendencies, it can and does occur in spite of their private individual sympathies for universal equal rights of individuals.

2. The short run versus long run evidence on freedom and development

Goldstone thinks the book inappropriately uses history of rich countries in the development debate, something the development community is not likely “to find relevant to the work they do.” Deaton disagrees: “some of the best parts of Tyranny are devoted to history.”

On the modern data, Goldstone mentions the modern travails of European democracy as discouraging for the democracy side of the debate. Lomasky similarly alludes to the manifest imperfections of democracy today in Washington DC, “the decreasingly robust growth of the democracies of the EU’s southern band, Japan, and perhaps the United States,” and then elsewhere mentions Singapore as a positive authoritarian example.

It is certainly not the best moment in US, EU, and Japanese history to be celebrating democracy! Today is an example of the periodic crises of confidence of democracy, the most extreme being in the 1930s, when Communism and Fascism were outperforming Western democracies (an episode that influenced development thinking). The 1930s in hindsight are also an example of how badly some societies can get it wrong by over-reacting to the short-run relative performance of freedom and autocracy.

We should not base the debate on the most recent years and forget the strong performance in the long run of the free systems. Does mentioning the travails of the EU’s southern band and Japan warrant dismissing the previous several decades of very high growth in those same places? Does the EU malaise and US political gridlock today warrant dismissing decades or centuries of progress under a high and growing level of freedom?

(Forgive me for one snarky aside: the Western experts may be so discouraged by current Western performance that they do not recommend freedom to countries in the Rest. But I cannot think of any Western experts recommending autocracy for their own societies based on this same evidence – why the difference?)

The deeper issue is that short run growth performance is plagued by remarkably noisy data, reflecting everything from measurement error to commodity shocks to recovery from previous disasters. (Goldstone notes that Zimbabwe under Robert Mugabe in 2010–2011 had one of the highest growth rates in the world.) Annual growth data have a standard deviation of 6 percentage points, and the average absolute value of differences between sources on the estimate of growth for the same country for

the same year is 2.2 percentage points. Noisy data and measurement error do have a constructive solution – just average over longer periods to get more reliable growth performance measures. “Longer periods” is another word for “history.”

In this light, there’s a remarkable bias in the debate if you exclude from development analysis the long run data from those who have had the most success at development, i.e., the history of today’s rich countries, in which freedom does play an important and ever growing role. I agree with Goldstone that today’s development community is unlikely to find relevant this history, but this argument is that these blinders are a big mistake.

Perhaps some believe that the West’s success is because of its exploitation of the Rest, such as slavery and colonialism, and so for this reason the Western model is hardly desirable or feasible today. The book addresses the sordid history of exploitation by many Western actors in the slave trade and colonial empires (one chapter is called “We oppress them if we can”). But the book points out that exploitation is not the path to prosperity. Those who used slaves achieved short run riches but much less long run development success than those who did not use slavery. So in the 17th century, the Dutch chose Dutch Guiana over New Amsterdam in treaty negotiations with the British because the slave plantations producing sugar in the former seemed so much more promising than that tiny city in the latter. The subsequent history of what is now Suriname and New York did not quite turn out that way. The book shows the same unfavorable comparison between Colombia and the US as a whole. Beyond what the book spells out, the classic work by David Eltis and Stanley Engerman found the profits of slavery too small to play much role in Britain’s industrial revolution, while they noted Portugal had larger and longer profits and failed to industrialize until much later.¹ The work by Engerman and the late Kenneth Sokoloff made a similar point comparing more exploitative South America to less exploitative North America (or the same comparison between the American South and American North).² As far as colonialism, the book and many others note how unsuccessful were the colonial rulers in Africa in developing Africa to yield much income for either the colonizers or the colonized. The book insists that the Western success happened to the extent that the oppressed forced the oppressors to recognize their rights not to be oppressed, and this indeed can still be a model today.

3. What are good and bad experts?

Deaton says economic policy experts know a lot of useful things, such as how to run central banks. They know that populist policies such as price controls, low procurement prices for farmers, overvalued exchange rates, and import substitution are a disaster. Democracies may choose populist policies and so get it more wrong than these experts. Lomasky also worries that democracies may choose “an enormous quantity of regulatory bureaucracy.” Goldstone similarly mentions democratic India’s bureaucracy raj. I am very glad the reviewers raised this important problem, it is something that helps clarify the debate, so let me respond.

¹ Eltis and Engerman (2000)

² Sokoloff and Engerman (2000)

First, these populist policies were often recommended by experts that did not respect economic freedoms that are end in themselves. Consider low procurement prices for farmers, meaning the government awards a purchasing monopoly on some exported crops to itself (such as cocoa in Ghana from late colonial times to 1983) and pays farmers much less than the world market price for the crop, pocketing the difference. Farmers, including very poor farmers, do not want to be subject to such coercion by a government procurement agency. In this sense, the populist outcome does reflect the tyranny of the “bad experts” who disrespect the rights of people in poor societies.

Second, it is of course true that, even without these bad experts, democracies sometimes choose populist policies that wise economist experts could have told them would lead to disaster. So what is the solution? I think the reviewers would probably agree that even the wise experts should not be in a position to force their expert opinions to be implemented. If it is done by an autocrat disposed to listen to economists, the autocrat may (at least temporarily) respect economic freedom, while violating other freedoms like political rights or human rights. And where is the mechanism for self-correction or protest if the experts-cum-autocrats get it wrong? The same is true of the coercive international mechanisms like IMF and World Bank experts designing “structural adjustment” conditionality. There are lots of stories of political and xenophobic backlash against “good policy” autocracy, international conditionality, and/or outside experts (e.g., post-Shah Iran, Mugabe in Zimbabwe, or the resurgence of populism in places like Bolivia, Nicaragua, and Venezuela). There are also numerous cases of homegrown democracy eventually getting economic policy mostly right – we should include again as always, all the historical cases usually dismissed (see previous point): Western Europe, Southern Europe, North America, Australia, New Zealand, Japan, now being joined by parts of Eastern Europe.

There are also the cases that continued “good” economic policies after the transition from autocracy to democracy, such as Chile, Ghana, South Korea, and Taiwan. There are also cases that started with majority voting but bad economic policies, but then moved to better economic policies – India! I think the lesson is that the process of learning good economic policies in societies with high democratic accountability to the citizens is likely superior to autocratic systems without accountability, without mechanisms for self-correction of egregious mistakes through protest and voting (such as Deaton’s extreme example of Mao’s Great Famine).

So, to finally answer Deaton’s important question, what are good and bad experts? The good experts are those embedded in a system with democratic accountability to the subjects of the expertise. Other good experts sell their expertise in a private market (construction engineers, for example) and hence are subject to the consent and choice of those who would buy their advice (“market accountability”). Hence, such good experts are themselves indirectly subject to democratic or market accountability, however imperfectly, so that their mistakes have some hope of being protested and corrected. The bad experts are those far from any accountability for the consequences of their advice, far from any mechanism for self-correction if they are getting it wrong. An example would be many Western experts recommending things for other peoples, advising autocrats who may just find the outside experts useful intellectual props to justify their oppressive rule as a “developmental state.”

If the key problem in aid for development was the lack of accountability to the intended beneficiaries, the key problem in experts for development is arguably the same lack of accountability to the intended beneficiaries.

Deaton is good in his review at answering his own doubts. Deaton himself gives an idea of the “bad experts” as the “outside developers {who} are no more responsive to the needs and rights of the poor than are the local non-democratic leaders... in the end they are responsive to their own funders, their own politicians, and their own domestic constituency.” Exactly.

4. Economists could just advocate principles and not only advocate specific interventions

Deaton makes another critical point, that the critique of experts “understates what we do know.” He points out despite my own argument against arrogant experts making top-down policy recommendations, my own recommendation “against directed technocratic development and in favor of spontaneous bottom-up development is also a policy,” and presumably I base this on my own expertise of some kind. Goldstone similarly notes that my recommendation for experts is to “denounce violations of liberty,” which is indeed a policy recommendation.

The reviewers are right, although this “policy recommendation” is a different kind of policy recommendation, one that is currently neglected in development. I suspect the reviewers might agree that economists should spend more of their time arguing for general principles that guide policy, something we are well qualified to do. Recommending principles is based on a more secure core of Economics 101 than is any theory or evidence for specific interventions. Economics 101 is not necessarily obvious to non-economists, but is widely agreed upon by economists. Many actors in development do not understand or embrace Principles 101, and economists’ traditional role of education, persuasion, and open debate on such principles would be very socially useful, although in ways that are intangible and unpredictable.

Instead, economists in development seem to spend almost all of their time and effort on very detailed recommendations that sometimes don’t even involve much economics (why should economists have any special insight into whether to use flip charts in education?) This probably reflects the political economy of development discussion that has a sort of urgent action bias that induces too much emphasis on very specific and tangible recommendations for “development interventions” (with little discussion of the typical economics question of who will have the incentive to actually do the recommended actions).

The economists’ core insight is that a market equilibrium yields outcomes that no one agent can control and that no one agent intended. More recently in the history of thought, economists have modeled a political economy equilibrium as similarly the unintentional result of many actors interacting. The economist or other expert cannot step outside the system; he or she cannot find the nonexistent Archimedean lever to move the whole system.

Lomasky reminds us of the great Adam Smith critique of the “man of system” that thinks “he can arrange the different members of a great society with as much ease as the hand arranges the different pieces upon a chess-board,” whereas the reality is that “in the great chess-board of human society, every single piece has a principle of motion of its own, altogether different from that which the legislature might chuse to impress upon it.”

The economist can only suggest principles that make systems tend to yield better outcomes. The principle is that when systems tend to equate private and social returns, the general equilibrium will be an improvement on an alternative system where actions have only private returns but not social returns, or only social returns and no private returns. Individual freedom has been long believed to be a system more likely to equate private and public returns than a system that coerces individuals to do things they do not choose freely on their own.

The field of political economy or public choice recognizes that this principle also extends to political actors: that systems should try to avoid a radical divergence between the social returns to political actions by political agents and the private return to those political agents in terms of power or wealth. A bad system is where there are public harms that yield private returns to politicians, and public goods that lack private returns to politicians. Autocrats and their officials can operate with impunity and so they are more likely than democrats to do harms that yield private returns – such as resettling farmers at gunpoint and then selling their lands to profit the ruling party in the Ethiopia and Uganda examples in the book.³ Autocrats are also more likely than democrats to neglect public goods with high social returns, since they can ignore the grievances of citizens deprived of essential public services like clean water.

Deaton is also gently invoking a different paradox inherent in my critique of arrogant and overconfident experts telling other people how to run their own affairs. Why does the critique also not apply to me, arrogantly and overconfidently telling other people to embrace my idea of “freedom” to run their own affairs? This is a great point, I completely accept that the critique should apply to me and to all other “expert” rights advocates, we also should be just as much aware of our own fallibility.

First of all, this critique should stop us from some ridiculous contradictions, like coercing other people to embrace their own right not to be coerced. (The Iraq War, mentioned by Lomasky, is arguably a case in point.) The critique of the tyranny of experts should try to stop all forms of coercive, arrogant, top-down impositions by experts, including by the “freedom” experts.

Second, what would a non-coercive, humble recommendation from experts conscious of their own fallibility, and hence opposed to a tyranny of experts, what would it look like? There is a long tradition of ideas on this question, such as James Madison’s famous maxim that we cannot assume angels will govern. If experts (or rulers who use our advice for their own non-angelic ends) are not angels, we would probably want the experts themselves subject to some self-correcting process of economic or political accountability, which penalizes and corrects expert mistakes, and rewards and scales up expert successes. It would probably support people themselves asserting their own rights to figure things out, to have the right to consent or not consent to the governmental arrangements, to be free to experiment in the private market such that there is some way to reverse mistakes and to do more of what succeeds. In short, something that itself sounds like some kind of bottom-up, spontaneous freedom, both political and economic.

Suppose experts know they are prone to make mistakes that are not self-correcting in an unaccountable system of experts advising autocrats. That knowledge in itself is

³ The argument is similar to that of Boettke and Leeson, who argue that freedom is more robust to the worst case scenario of malevolent or ignorant political leaders and officials (Boettke and Leeson 2004).

enough for the experts to suggest a different system that takes power away from autocrats and experts and gives people more rights to consent and to choose for themselves.

The humble recommendations for freedom will not make any utopian claims of instantaneous and universal payoffs from journeys towards freedom. There will be many setbacks and mistakes along the way, there will be periods of stalling out, some people may seem not to be even interested in beginning the journey at all. But it is still better than a coercive imposition by experts-cum-autocrats, lacking mechanisms for choice or consent, and lacking the ability to protest and correct mistakes.

5. The flaws of democracy

Deaton, Goldstone, and Lomasky all note the threat of interest group capture under democracy.

Let me discuss this problem using an illustration from Deaton on two different kinds of dangers in democracy. First, the majority may kill off growth with populist policies that expropriate the rich minority and destroy incentives for investment and innovation. Second, the interests of the poor may be neglected because a rich elite may use their wealth to buy off politicians with campaign contributions or other mechanisms.

These are very real dangers of democracy. The first response is again: compared to what? Autocrats can also favor narrow interest groups that prop up their rule, with much less prospect for self-correction. The virtue of democracy is free speech, ability to protest, to mobilize support against dangers of the current government's policies or the current system, and to have a means of inducing corrections in systems or policies, including but not limited to replacing the current government or system with a new one. The loud and persistent complaints about too much populism or too much elite preservation are themselves a positive check against going too much in one direction or the other. It will never reach any utopian resolution, but it seems better than autocratic regimes that lack such self-correcting mechanisms.

The second response is that these two opposite fears about democracy may at least partly cancel each other out. The rich may be in between: too powerful to be expropriated, but not powerful enough to buy the elections.

Deaton is correct to note with the Jane Jacobs vs. Robert Moses case that the Jacobs solution favoring local neighborhoods against a top-down planner created new problems in New York by leading to limits on building height or possibly too much historical preservation. The big point is that democracy is a messy competition of interest groups. In this untidy democracy, each solution creates new problems. There can be no general claim that the system always gets it right; the claim is more that it deals with the worse problems, and the more severe the problem the more likely it is to be corrected.

Lomasky notes the problem of workers who already have jobs getting regulations to protect their job security at the expense of new workers who don't yet have jobs. Political equilibrium under democracy will indeed often be stuck at some suboptimal level relative to getting everything right, but again compared to what? Autocracy has far more power to make bad things more extreme and more persistent.

A lot of democracy discussion places too much emphasis on actions of Congress or Parliaments or presidents or prime ministers, who are indeed unlovely in a close-up.

There is too little emphasis on the political economy general equilibrium that has already prevented a lot of bad things from happening. Ohio farmers are not marched off their lands at gunpoint, protesters are not shot down in the streets or sent to lengthy jail terms, a free press exists where journalists can expose the folly of those in power, and Professors Deaton, Goldstone, Lomasky, and Easterly are free to put forward their complaints about the current situation without threat of assassination or property confiscation or jail. Of course, many bad things could still happen and have happened under democracy, but the list of horrors that did NOT happen under democracy compared to autocracy gets too little attention.

6. Technocrats in economics academia

Deaton protests the line I draw between academic economists – who just debate theory and evidence – and development economists who are influenced by political agendas to be technocrats. He suggests development economics overlaps more than I allow with mainstream academic economics, and mainstream economics is sometimes also being technocratic. Deaton gives one example as Randomized Controlled Trials (RCTs). RCTs do often seem to serve technocratic agendas, but partly because they are so tied up with policy agendas, i.e., non-academic agendas. Goldstone is far more positive on RCTs and their academic practitioners, seeing them as the opposite of dogmatic experts, willing to learn from bottom up experience.

I wanted to pass on the critique of expertise in academia, partly because I think there is still a social norm of academic debate not being too obviously tied up with political agendas, whereas the non-academic development experts are permitted to more closely identify with politics and policy and agendas.

To avoid a post-modernist hell where there is no objective knowledge, we need to draw a line between one arena in which debates have political agendas and some other pure arena of debate – where only logic and evidence apply. I oversimplified by drawing this line between academics and public intellectuals, but the line has to be drawn somewhere and hopefully some arena for pure debate can be preserved.

An important related point by Deaton is that “the technocratic illusion is never far away in an economics that is centered around optimization. Optimization is engineering...” Goldstone on the other hand, notes that economics is or should be about personal choice (as surely Deaton would also agree). The reviewers capture well here the split personality of economics. On one hand, optimization is engineering. The common thought experiment of the “social planner” can be used to envision a way that such engineering could indeed be carried out for a whole society by experts. Yet, on the other hand, the usual economics model is indeed one of an individual freely choosing their own optimum (as a consumer, producer, worker, employer, etc.) The freedom of choice of individuals, along with the implicit belief that individuals will act on their own in their own interest, has long been at the heart of economics.

The increasing awareness of politics in economics that Deaton, Goldstone, and Lomasky all note is important in two different ways.

First, as they note, the technocratic dream of the disinterested social planner is an illusion, politics will inevitably intrude – we now have a vast literature on political economy or public choice.

Second, much less commonly appreciated, the movement of economics beyond its original arenas in the UK and the US to encompass the whole world took economists to places where freedom of choice of individuals was conspicuously absent, where individuals were systematically oppressed and coerced by autocrats or powerful elites. Many development economists of the more applied, policy-oriented and less academic kind failed to adequately appreciate either the intellectual demise of a benevolent “social planner” or the absence of freedom of individual choice in the places they were operating.

It is time they did appreciate it more and to bring down what Deaton calls the long-delayed curtain on the idea of technocratic development by experts.

7. Don't overstate the case for democracy, individual rights, political and economic freedom

I am correctly chastised by the reviewers, that democracy is not a “cure-all” (Goldstone), that good health outcomes do not always require democracy (Deaton). The reviewers object to overselling how easily, quickly, and always democracy and individual rights solves problems better than autocracy. Let me quickly concede the point that we are discussing what Isaiah Berlin called “the crooked timber of humanity.” In the story of freedom amongst the crooked timber, there are many outliers, autocrats can outperform democrats in substantial and important cases, and almost anything can happen in the short run. (I am happy to accept Deaton’s praise elsewhere that I am “refreshingly nihilistic” about the short-run growth and infant mortality evidence for or against freedom.)

The relevant question about freedom is always, again and again, “compared to what?” The option of choosing nothing does not exist. Science is not about believing in nothing, it is about testing two alternative hypotheses against each other. What do theories predict about which will work better, freedom or autocracy? On which side is the relative preponderance of the evidence?

The positivist case for political and economic freedom, if there is such a case, should come from modest and patient accumulation of theorizing and evidence-gathering, considering all the long run and short run data to assess how well they conform to plausible – but not unchallengeable – theories on how freedom would work. Goldstone notes some of the many scholars who have been doing this for a long time: Douglass North, Avner Greif, Daron Acemoglu, James Robinson, Simon Johnson, to which I would add many more such as Elinor Ostrom, Oliver Williamson, Joel Mokyr, Stanley Engerman, and Kenneth Sokoloff – and of course – F.A. Hayek.

There is a lot of room to improve the evidence under discussion in a public policy discussion on democracy that often seems to end the argument with a single example (Lee Kuan Yew!), even a very short-run episode subject to enormous noise (Meles Zenawi because of a few years of high growth and mortality reduction!). It is not true to how science works to make the whole outcome of a scientific debate ride on one particularly vivid episode, or the most recent episode, or even on one single, most recent study. The discussion should aim at least at elevating the level of discussion and quality of evidence to include all the previous literature, and all the data, both long run and short run, both historical and modern.

8. Freedom as an end in itself

I agree completely with Deaton that freedom is enough as an end in itself. I do wish we could all spend a lot more time talking about rights for poor people just for their own sake. As with the rush to action plans in development discussed in point ten below, we should resist the rush in development to change the subject to debating the material payoffs of freedom.

Alas, even if we convince the development community to value two separate goals – freedom and material relief from poverty – their next move will be to ask: are they conflicting goals? Development infatuation with “benevolent autocrats” suggests there is a conflict. I present reasons to be skeptical of the claim of autocrats that they offer material payoffs that justify autocracy. The value of freedom as an end in itself can also be seen as putting the burden of proof on the autocrat to prove that he brings the poor material benefits in return for them accepting his denial of freedom to them. (And, again, is our required evidentiary burden of proof any higher if we ourselves are the ones being coerced, instead of other people?).

9. Democracy versus individual rights?

Lomasky asks for more discussion of democracy versus individual rights. This raises two important issues: the risk of majoritarian tyranny under democracy that would violate individual rights, and traditional rights versus new “positive rights” such a right to health care, or even a right to development.

The first is the most serious. The book insists a full definition of political freedom is not just majority voting, it also includes protections for individual rights. I agree with Lomasky that governments elected by a majority of voters are not necessarily benevolent, in fact they can do awful things to individuals or minorities.

I disagree with Lomasky on limiting the definition of democracy to majority voting, and I disagree on seeing democracy as generally antagonistic to individual rights. Theory and evidence suggest autocrats are more likely than democrats to violate individual rights!

Democracy must include some protections for individuals even to have free and fair elections. For example, some parties may use coercion of voters to win elections, obviously violating both individual rights and the principle of free and fair elections. Moreover, the idea of fair elections is a dynamic concept that should protect the rights of the losers. After one election, the winning party can strip away rights even more from individuals in the losing party to make the losers less able to contest future elections.

The book argued that another ingredient of freedom and democracy is the set of cultural values that treats individuals from outside one’s own group with tolerance, respecting individuals’ freedom to make their own choices (“individualism”). Research by Persson and Tabellini suggests a virtuous circle between values of individualism and a history of democracy (what they call “democratic capital”).⁴ With these tolerant values under democracy, a political coalition grows to respect the rights of minorities and individuals. Autocratic rulers often play on hatreds of minorities to divide and rule.

⁴ Persson and Tabellini (2009).

There is also a vicious circle between a history of autocracy and values that promote intolerance of other groups.

On the second issue, the “positive rights” idea tends to muddy rather than clarify the freedom debate. Freedom and material development are both worthy goals, but the development community has tended to neglect the first and concentrate on the second. The idea of positive rights seeks to double down on this skewed emphasis on the second by creating a “right” to material development, or at least some parts of it. The “rights” language does not make much sense with positive rights. With traditional rights of individuals, there are clear lines of accountability – a rights violation has an identifiable violator who can be punished. With positive rights, who is to blame if the positive right is not achieved? Autocrats (who clearly violate the traditional rights) can and do claim they will do better than democrats at delivering positive rights, which just takes us back to the debate on whether autocrats do better at delivering material development.

10. What should we do?

I close with something that came up a lot in reviews and discussions of the book, and comes up again with these reviewers, to which I will probably over-react because of long being tormented by this question (both by myself and by others).

Let us call those four words “what should we do?” the Big Question. It seems to be at the center of virtually all discussions of development in the public intellectual arena. One of the most heretical and unpopular things anyone can do in development is to refuse to answer the Big Question.

The reviewers illustrate this in their response to the ideas presented in the book, although they don’t agree. Goldstone asks about the book’s message:

Does this mean development experts should simply close up shop? Easterly says no, but gives very little idea what they should do instead. It would seem that one crucial role that development professionals can play is to denounce violations of liberty and devise incentives and penalties that could induce repressive regimes to grant more liberty to their people. But how that could be done, when most international charters forbid interference in sovereign states’ domestic affairs, is not made clear.

Lomasky also voices a similar concern that these ideas, that “lots of charitable foundations will find themselves with precious little left to do.”

Deaton, in contrast, does not worry about whether existing development agencies have something left to do. Goldstone and Lomasky are also sympathetic to other agendas besides the Big Question (like Goldstone’s “denouncing violations of liberty”), so the response that follows is really more to the development community than to these reviewers.

The “what should we do?” question seems unavoidable when well-intentioned and altruistic people simply want some guidance on how they can translate their altruism into something helpful for the world’s poor. There is understandable revulsion towards anything suggesting inaction, signaling apathy towards tragic problems. This author is just as much against apathy about the plight of the global poor as anyone else, and I sympathize with those so urgently seeking something constructive to do.

There is also great discontent with the current organizational status quo in aid and development, so another part of the Big Question is how to reform or reorganize aid organizations. This author has shown as much dissatisfaction with the aid and development organizational status quo as most other commentators.

So, yes, the Big Question should be asked and answered, as it already is in aid and development discussions (including by this author’s previous book, *The White Man’s Burden*).

But making all development discussion *only* about the Big Question seems to foster an unintentional intellectual equilibrium that distorts and censors the development debate. The Big Question is the wrong question to govern the whole development discussion. There is a role for some of us who simply refuse to answer it, and that refusal does not imply apathy or endorsement of the status quo. Here is why.

First, the Big Question often presumes that we development experts and our technical recommendations are indeed a principal driver of development and also that we are or should be in charge of choosing the right answers. Those who want to answers to the Big Question usually did not intend this assumption, yet it often seems to follow. So asking the question may already grant all the main premises of the technocratic approach, shutting down debate on the technocratic approach. Robert Solow once said,

Suppose someone ... announces to me that he is Napoleon Bonaparte. The last thing I want to do with him is to get involved in a technical discussion of cavalry tactics at the Battle of Austerlitz. If I do that, I'm getting tacitly drawn into the game that he is Napoleon Bonaparte.⁵

Second, the Big Question has often limited challenges to the status quo more than it has facilitated such challenges. The Question looks for answers that are politically feasible in the short run. Hence it entertains tinkering only within the current political status quo, and so shuts down the critiques of that status quo. There is the usual dilemma of working within the system or protesting the system. The first option is not necessarily a bad one, but there should be room for some to choose the second option. There is quite a bit of history of development intellectuals being (unintentionally and unconsciously) muzzled by limiting themselves to answers to “what must we do?” Those asking this question included British colonial rulers in Africa, Western imperial interests in pre-revolutionary China, post-colonial autocrats, and US foreign policy makers wanting to justify alliances with autocrats in the Cold War and today in the War on Terror. Limiting ourselves to answering this question misses the opportunity to criticize the status quo in which colonial rule, imperialism, and US-supported autocracy may really not be so good for development.

Third, the Big Question protects even more another part of the status quo – us development experts – in a way that stifles thinking. It would be unfair to say we consciously limit ourselves to ideas that give us something to do. Yet we should consider whether our insistence on “What should we do?”, however well-intentioned, may unintentionally boost those ideas with a starring role for experts. By comparison, the “what should we do?” question is not as dominant in other subfields of economics.

⁵ Quoted from Klammer (1988).

In these fields, ideas without a starring role for economists can be considered more openly. Having fewer restrictions on ideas usually leads to more progress, including in ways that could lead to better action recommendations.

Take finance as example. People wanted action recommendations from finance economists that would help them earn high returns in the stock market. If finance had forever remained stuck on the “what must we do to earn high returns?” question, it would have led to colossal wasted effort. Finance economists instead developed the idea that the advice of finance economists will NOT help you beat the market. After that, more progress was possible in financial economics on the principles under which financial markets lead to better outcomes.

I am not claiming any equally strong theorem that we development economists will not ever help you achieve development – but at least being open to ideas about our own limitations opens us to more progress on development ideas. Paradoxically, the most useful economists can be those who explain the limits on usefulness of economists.

Fourth, the Big Question pre-supposes agreement on the objectives of action. Development objectives are usually about material poverty, because development has been quite successful getting us rich people to care about the plight of the un-rich (more on this below). Suppose some of us free people also care about the plight of the un-free? Limiting discussion to the Big Question does not allow enough room for a discussion about which objectives to care about.

If we had started with the goal of freedom for the un-free, things might have been different. We might not have not been so quick to praise some autocratic regimes for their wise “developmental states” (e.g., China, Singapore, and Rwanda), we might have paid more attention to the positive CHANGE in freedom (e.g., in China, Singapore, and Rwanda), and we might have celebrated more the attainment of high LEVELS of both political and economic freedom (e.g., in Chile, South Korea, and Taiwan). We might have not provided intellectual and financial support to autocrats who jail domestic advocates for freedom (e.g., peaceful dissident Eskinder Nega in Ethiopia). We might not have stigmatized migrants from poor countries as “brain drain,” when they are exercising their freedom to flee oppressive regimes. We might not have appointed Rwandan dictator Paul Kagame to chair a UN commission on technology in development (as happened in 2012). We might not have allowed our own development agencies to violate the rights of poor people with their own projects (once again, involuntary resettlement in the World Bank’s Mubende project in Uganda). We might not have accepted that our leading development agency, the World Bank, must censor itself to never mention the word “democracy.” We might not be so quick to give up on freedom when there are disappointments and setbacks, such as in the aftermath to the Arab Spring. We might not be so quick to declare the cause of freedom as hopeless: “grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change” as I heard a debater on development and freedom once put it. We don’t give up or announce things are hopeless with material poverty, why would we do so with freedom?

More generally, if we cared more about the big debate between freedom and autocracy worldwide, we might have devoted more of our time to that debate, and less time to technical recommendations that claim neutrality on that debate.

There might be a tradeoff between objectives of material prosperity and freedom, which we can start debating (see above) once you allow us to talk about something else besides quick answers to the Big Question.

Fifth, the Big Question assumes that action recommendations do actually lead to action. The World Bank thinks of itself as the “Knowledge Bank” for action recommendations. Yet a recent World Bank study found that 31 % of the World Bank’s “knowledge products” full of action recommendations have never been downloaded, and 87 % were never cited.⁶

Recommendations usually are directed at a small audience of policy wonks (such as those who failed to read World Bank knowledge products), who seek to influence an even smaller number of central actors like Western aid agencies or Western foreign policy-makers, UN organizations, and the World Bank itself. The policy wonks and the central actors are already overwhelmed with action recommendations, and so action does not so easily or quickly follow any one set of recommendations. Moreover, these actors may be the wrong ones for promoting the goal of freedom. Western government interventions in other countries’ affairs to promote “freedom” often backfire, making it easier for dictators to discredit their domestic opponents with xenophobic, patriotic rhetoric.

I would also personally resist the temptation to make action recommendations aimed at drastically changing – perhaps even abolishing – Western aid agencies, UN organizations, or the World Bank. I am now free to pass on these action recommendations since virtually everyone else in development (and my own past work) talks exhaustively about this. In the context of the freedom debate, such action recommendations would be a huge distraction, derailing this debate before it begins. Meanwhile, all such action recommendations accomplish is to join the extremely long list of previous such recommendations overwhelming (and thus hardly influencing) the central actors on Western foreign policy. The next point suggests a better option.

Sixth, The Big Question assumes that action recommendations are the only way to promote helpful actions. Getting ideas on freedom right is something more powerful, and should happen first, because it guides actions in the long run. Unlike action recommendations aimed at central actors, ideas can guide or induce action in a decentralized way among myriads of potential actors, from entrepreneurs to voters to activists to social reformers to philanthropists to politicians to local and national officials to development agencies.

One of the most popular quotes in the history of economics is this one from Keynes:

The ideas of economists and political philosophers, both when they are right and when they are wrong are more powerful than is commonly understood. Indeed, the world is ruled by little else. Practical men, who believe themselves to be quite exempt from any intellectual influences, are usually slaves of some defunct economist.

The long debate on ideas on a free society versus a Soviet or authoritarian system arguably affected whether whole societies wound up as one or the other, and this battle of ideas continues to matter today.

A current example helps illustrate this point. On July 26, 2014, Hungarian leader Viktor Orban gave a speech to an audience of ethnic Hungarians in the town of Băile Tușnad, Romania (which Orban called by its Hungarian name Tusnádfürdő). Orban

⁶ Doemeland and Trevino (2014).

described the most important divide in the world today as around the “race going on to develop a state that is capable of making a nation successful” (Orban 2014). He described how “the most popular topic in thinking today is trying to understand how systems that are not Western, not liberal, not liberal democracies and perhaps not even democracies, can nevertheless make their nations successful.” He cited expert “international analysts,” who suggest the secrets to national development success are provided by autocratic “stars” such as Singapore, China, and Russia. Orban quoted another expert, an (unnamed) “internationally recognised analyst” on how “liberal values today embody corruption, sex and violence.”

Apparently following this expert guidance, Viktor Orban declared that in Hungary, “we must break with liberal principles” such as individual rights, instead “serving the interests of the nation.” Orban announced that what “we are constructing in Hungary is an illiberal state, a non-liberal state.” Orban’s crackdown on non-governmental organizations in Hungary was justified because they were “attempting to enforce foreign interests here in Hungary.”⁷ That Orban could or would move in an illiberal direction reflects not only his own ideas from defunct economists, but the ideas of a much broader circle of Hungarians that makes Orban’s move politically possible.

The Orban example also suggests the importance of advocacy of ideals such as individual rights for their own sake (see Deaton point earlier). This is another intangible and unpredictable activity that can gradually change social norms for the better, in a way that leads eventually to social change. Before there was emancipation of slaves, or women’s suffrage, or civil rights for blacks, or gay rights, there was a long process of advocacy that changed norms from condoning unequal rights for each of these groups to accepting equal rights.

The development community has itself been very successful at advocacy for a norm with which I agree – that extreme material poverty is unacceptable, that the world’s rich should care about the world’s poor. Couldn’t this same community embrace advocacy of another norm – that the world’s free should care about the world’s unfree?

It is revealing that there is a lack of outcry in development when the World Bank, USAID, or the United Kingdom’s Department for International Development (DFID) got credibly accused several years ago doing projects that themselves violate rights, such as the aforementioned forced resettlement in the Mubende story in Uganda, the forced resettlement under the villagization program in Ethiopia, or the manipulation of donors’ food relief to starve the opposition in Ethiopia (documented by Human Rights Watch in 2010). These episodes suggest a retrograde social norm in development that could use some improvement. It may be true that development agencies cannot positively intervene within an autocratic system to promote rights, but they at least should not violate rights themselves. The point is not to draw up new organizational charts and mandates for the World Bank, USAID, or DFID, but to address the retrograde social norm itself.

There may be a glimmer of hope in that DFID recently announced it is discontinuing support for the Ethiopian program lined to the Ethiopian villagization, apparently because of protests by groups such as Human Rights Watch. The World Bank denied any blame in the same program, but World Bank President Jim Kim did recently indicate “deep concern” (this counts as progress).⁸

⁷ Speech transcript (2014)

⁸ Chavkin (2015)

The advantage of advocacy of freedom in the war of ideas, by those who are NOT themselves compromised as Western government or aid agency officials, or as consultants to Western governments or aid agencies, or even as critical reformers of Western aid agencies, is that they have more credibility as disinterested advocates of freedom wherever and whenever the battle is raging between local advocates of freedom and their local autocratic oppressors or foreign oppressors.

Such an intellectual alliance of freedom advocates across borders played a big role in the battle for freedom in Europe and America in the 18th, 19th and 20th centuries, in the battle against slavery, in the battles against Fascist and Communist totalitarians, in the battle against colonialism, imperialism, and apartheid, and then later and still today in the battle for freedom in post-colonial Latin America, Asia, and Africa. I respectfully ask the development audience, please let us join the battle.

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