

William Easterly – The Tyranny of Experts

Reviewed by Katelyn Gorski

William Easterly's *The Tyranny of Experts* is an eye-opening book and worthwhile reading for anyone who wants to work in development or gain a deeper understanding of effective methods to alleviate poverty. The book serves as a strong argument in favor of spontaneous solutions to problems in development over an authoritarian, technocratic approach that denies individual rights. Through many historical examples from Africa, Asia, Europe and the Americas, Easterly demonstrates that although technocratic solutions may solve some development problems in the short term, greater long-term prosperity can be achieved in societies that promote free trade, innovation and entrepreneurship.

The sense of history within *The Tyranny of Experts* is one of its great strengths. Critiquing “Blank Slate” thinking throughout the book, Easterly provides valuable historical context to educate the reader on how current development thinking evolved, tracing its beginnings to the post-colonial era, when Western powers needed a reason to retain power and influence as their empires collapsed. Later, Cold War strategy would lead countries like the United States to support autocratic leaders and technocratic development initiatives that helped it retain influence in the face of the Communist threat. It is clear that the Western approach to development has always served multiple political purposes.

Easterly's emphasis on history over the long term enables him to highlight how different practices work over generations. For example, in discussing the insular trading practices among the Maghribi people, Easterly is able to identify how the level of trust

between group members facilitated trade, but ultimately inhibited prosperity by limiting with whom the group could and would trade. Again, Easterly brings home the message that history must not be ignored, and therefore a good solution in one country may not be the right solution for another based on the specific context of each.

Throughout *The Tyranny of Experts*, we see that poverty is complex, and not caused by a lack of talent or intelligence among people who are just waiting for development experts to save them (as the deeply racist post-colonial leaders seem to have thought). This examination of history and motive makes for an exciting read, providing a new lens through which to review topics most of us have researched before, like the slave trade. Easterly argues that, “oppression has broad consequences that hold back development” (159). He explains that even today, countries from which people were taken to be sold as slaves experience greater levels of poverty, and are more reluctant to trade with local neighboring communities that helped capture their people. Italy serves as another example Easterly provides to highlight the long term consequences of oppression as the author shows how Italian cities that experienced absolute rule in the twelfth century and were more restricted in trade do not fare as well even today as those that were free cities. A history of limited rights and damaged relationships negatively impacts trade opportunities, thereby inhibiting development. Easterly’s examples demonstrate that those consequences can last for centuries.

The book maintains credibility by acknowledging arguments his detractors could make about the success of technocratic initiatives. Easterly questions solutions that, at first glance, seem to have worked. One example provided is an autocratic Ethiopia’s reduction of child mortality, which led to accolades from leaders and influences like

Tony Blair and Bill Gates. Easterly acknowledges this perceived success, but uncovers flaws in reporting that call into question whether such results are worth. We find that childhood mortality data is known to be imprecise, especially in nations where birth and death rates are not reliably reported (123). Meanwhile, this Ethiopian regime was known for oppressing political rivals and denying them food aid, a fact ignored by those who were celebrating the regime's success in health initiatives.

I also want to credit Easterly for consistency in his approach. When he argues in favor of protecting individual rights to promote prosperity, he values the individual above the state. I was struck by his inclusion of arguments in favor of freedom of movement, which particularly caught my attention, as the immigration debate is ever ongoing. Easterly gives the example that most Haitians who have lifted themselves out of poverty are living outside of Haiti. In addition, he questions why a skilled professional like a doctor from a poorer country should remain at home out of loyalty to the needs of his or her country, particularly when that individual could live a much more prosperous life by relocating to the United States. To see Easterly treat individual rights with enough importance to transcend borders was especially refreshing after reading through the many ways that racism has influenced development policy.

The ultimate purpose of all of this history, all these different case studies from across the world, is to highlight how an emphasis on individual rights is proven to lead to greater prosperity. Although an autocrat may be able to accomplish specific development goals faster, it may not be sustainable or worth the price of oppression. Easterly writes that, "oppression has broad consequences that hold back development" (159). As we have seen in the examples I have cited, the negative consequences of autocratic rule can last

for generations.

Of course, moving away from autocracies cannot happen overnight, and in certain cases it may make sense to support positive initiatives that will promote health, and therefore prosperity, even if the government itself is deeply flawed. In reading *The Tyranny of Experts*, I appreciated that Easterly is ever grounded in reality, and the author posits that, “an incremental positive change in freedom will yield a positive change in well-being for the world's poor.” Although change will not happen instantaneously, moving toward greater autonomy will encourage innovation, trade and prosperity.

Easterly concludes that we must not be “seduced” by seemingly benevolent autocrats, whose power means that they can accomplish development goals faster, but at too great a cost. It is here that I believe Easterly misses an opportunity. I would have been interested to see the book discuss the rights of women in relation to autocracies. To me, this would have been particularly relevant, as rights for women have been known to increase under autocrats. Under Egyptian dictator Hosni Mubarak, women enjoyed such perks as proportional representation in parliament. As Mubarak’s government was overthrown and a new government was forming, laws that increased the rights of women were labeled, “Suzanne’s Laws” after Mubarak’s wife, linked to the old regime and seen as initiative’s whose true purpose was to appease the West. This strange connection between women’s rights and oppressive rule is part of the reason women so often see their rights disappear during political transition. I would be interested to see Easterly include a comparison of case studies specific to women in autocratic societies versus free societies. Such a discussion could have fit nicely with Easterly's exploration of the decline of child mortality in Ethiopia, and how it led to the Western leaders overlooking

the problematic aspects of a dictator's rule (such as denying political opponents food aid).

And as Whole Planet Foundation has a strong focus on empowered women changing their own lives through entrepreneurship, it would have made the book even more relevant to our work (surprisingly, Easterly did not write this book only for us).

The Tyranny of Experts is a valuable history lesson and a highly recommended read. It will ask the reader to question “facts” and statistics presented by development institutions, to rethink old ideas about historical events and to value the rights of the individual, even when an autocrat manages to accomplish some good initiatives. I often think that confirmation bias causes people to seek out books that will verify what they already think, and that it is difficult to change anyone’s opinion. I believe this book presents arguments compelling enough to challenge existing beliefs.