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## **Development as agency: a radical direction for postcolonial humanitarian aid**

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The last half-century of international efforts to “develop” poor economies has seen monumental failures interspersed with occasional success stories. The primary reason for the failures is a misunderstanding of what the goals of development should be, a misunderstanding that is itself caused by incorrect definitions of what “development” is in the first place. The concept of development has undergone substantial revisions since the postwar period, following shifts in international policy and the volatile preferences of Western donor agencies (Rist 1997). But no understanding of development that has been popular in the “dev biz” since the 1950s approximates what I take to be the ideal conception: development has little to do with wealth, industry, production, market competitiveness, or technology, and is instead the availability of sufficient agency to determine one’s own sociopolitical identity and action.

I will explore this notion of *development as agency* by presenting a modified version of the human capabilities approach championed by economist Amartya Sen (1980, 1988, 1994, 2009) and philosopher Martha Nussbaum (1995, 1997, 2011). Development as agency proscribes most past and current development efforts by the West and prescribes two alternative approaches, roughly identifiable with noninterference and self-determination. *Noninterference* mandates that Western institutions—states, corporations, groups, individuals—cease all actions that hinder the capability of non-Western societies to determine their own moral, social, and political arrangements. Some of these actions include free-market trade, irresponsible resource appropriation, protectionism, and transnational tariffs. In arguing this point I will borrow from the work of Thomas Pogge (2004, 2008, 2010). *Self-determination* mandates that Western development workers cease any attempts to engineer societies based on their socioeconomic and political models. Such attempts are usually futile and cause great suffering, but even if they improved living conditions in the short run, deeply impoverished economies must be allowed to reappropriate themselves of their sociopolitical autonomy and decide their own social arrangements.

Both approaches are compatible with the continuation of an industry of humanitarian aid, and in some regard even with reparatory efforts, whether in resources or direct cash transfers. Neither noninterference nor self-determination entail isolation and disregard, and my argument must not be taken as a “free pass” for the West to ignore the damage it has caused. But a more pressing issue is the damage that Western nations *continue* to cause. Insofar as *that*, and not the legacy of colonialism, is the primary hindrance to development, that is what must cease. Thus, in its barest form, my argument is that humanitarian aid is only effective when coupled with practicing noninterference and allowing self-determination pursuant to an ideal conception of development as agency.

### **I. Improvement and domination: why most development work fails**

In the colonial period, to “develop” meant to enhance a colony’s infrastructures for unilateral exploitation by Europeans, in the same way that one develops urban projects or computer soft-

ware: to make them functional according to the purpose of their construction. Genuine efforts to improve the lives and opportunities of indigenous peoples were almost unheard of until the postwar period, and even then were complicated by the subsistence of exploitation relations and the arbitrary imposition of Western social standards on communities that never asked for them. At bottom, even the sincerest development efforts were motivated by a hegemonic desire to annex non-Western economies in the socioeconomic structures of Western capitalism; see, for example, the Office du Niger in current-day Mali (Van Beusekom 2001) and the French-Belgian “improvement” campaigns in West Africa (Hilhorst 2003).

From the 1950s to the 1980s, development took the shape of humanitarian aid and social experiments in poverty eradication, some more effective than others. Charities like Oxfam, previously designed for wartime assistance in Europe, were repurposed as international nongovernmental organizations for famine relief in the Third World. It is difficult, in this period, to draw a line between disaster relief, such as the Red Cross can provide after a major earthquake, and long-term efforts aimed at combating poverty. Many nongovernmental organizations did both, and the rise to prominence of bodies like MSF testifies to this dual purpose (Barnett 2011). Surely NGOs did attempt to address the root of the problem rather than the symptom, and it is in this period that we see international NGOs cooperating closely with local governments. Oxfam’s work in Nyerere’s pseudo-socialist Tanzania is a notorious example (Jennings 2007).

While such efforts to eliminate poverty are laudable, they incur serious moral, political, and practical problems. We can identify at least four separate and related issues:

- (A) The inability of many development projects to understand the environment of their application and thus to effect sensible and culture-sensitive change.
- (B) The self-serving interests of Western development industries, both cultural and financial.
- (C) The delusion of thinking that it is up to the West to develop the underdeveloped, a mindset that replaces the moral duty of reparation with the self-aggrandizement of white saviors.
- (D) The neglect of political economy by many development workers and donors, which blinds them to the “glocal” effects of international trade and directs them to exert undue pressure on the wrong institutions: national instead of transnational, local instead of global, non-Western instead of Western, towns and states instead of corporations.

Below I survey all four issues, paying special attention to the latter.

The failure to properly understand the cultural and sociopolitical environment in which development happens is a crucial hindrance to many failed development projects. Part of the problem is that culture is just very difficult to understand without long-term exposure. Even ethnographic studies take years to complete and still barely scratch the surface, and the relationship of ethnographers and development theorists is not always an easy one (Hilhorst 2003). But the major problem is that despite this difficulty, many development workers assume they already *know* or can quickly learn what their target population needs, when in fact they seldom do. Ferguson (1994) explains this problem in epistemic terms, drawing from his experience in Lesotho. Even though development workers may know the facts and the figures, and even if they may have their conceptual and economic ducks in a row, they lack a practical know-how that is too deeply embedded in local culture to be mastered and molded. Ferguson calls *mētis* this situated, practical, and unteachable knowledge. Despite good intentions, those who refuse to acknowledge that they do

not in fact “know better” are guilty of the continuation of Western imperialism by epistemic and cultural means.

The second and third problem (self-interest and racism) are closely related. The Western development industry is a massive enterprise whose primary goal is self-preservation. Mired in the time-wasting and overhead-inflating intricacies of donor PR and political lobbying, many in the industry have lost sight of the actual goal, which is the long-term reduction of systemic poverty. This applies to agents at all levels, from the cocktail-party benefactors who remain remote and detached, to the ethnographers, nurses, professors, and volunteers “on the ground” who have to satisfy donor-established goals and meet publication deadlines for their business-driven universities (Dichter 2003; Tvedt 2006). Thus, in decidedly Western fashion, even an activity like development that is by definition other-centered becomes “about us.”

Racism is also a serious issue. Western elites tend to view non-Westerners as Others in need of rescuing, thus engaging in a humanitarian variant of what Edward Said (1978) calls “orientalism.” Development workers often fail to understand themselves as whites in brown cultures, Westerners in non-Western societies, rich among the poor, privileged among the oppressed. This is unsurprising, given the fondness of Western culture to celebrate its achievements and conceptualize others accordingly, in a twisted sort of Nietzschean master morality. The result is a “white-savior industrial complex” (Cole 2012) that casts us Westerners in the dominant role of active aid-givers and those that we help in the submissive role of passive recipients. This mentality takes many shapes, from the irrational worship of celebrity humanitarianism (Kapoor 2012) to the constant rehashing in our media and literature of white guilt stories (Newitz 2009). All these manifestations are supposedly race-neutral and hide behind generic calls to empathy and kindness, but they ignore the systemic racial injustice they should address.

Charles Mills (1997; 2007) makes this point especially cogently. Current attempts to embrace seemingly universal moral principles are the latest in a series of efforts to make whites feel better about their ancestors’ oppression of other races. One way is by promoting globalism. Mills criticizes John Rawls’s (1999) liberal social contract theories, but his remarks apply just as well to champions of liberal and democratic cosmopolitanism like David Held (2010). Another way, I think, is through development work. The realization that their ancestors were responsible for much of the world’s misery spurs some white Westerners to action, thus unlocking the aforementioned white-guilt and white-savior mechanisms. Think, for example, of the NGOs and domestic advocacy groups that appeal to thousands of mostly young Americans with sob stories (Invisible Children) or by presenting themselves as morally genuine or even “native” (Fair Trade). Through such self-deceptions, well-meaning but ignorant Westerners cast themselves as the sole engineers of lasting global change. “Be Humankind,” says Oxfam in a famous UK ad campaign (Lake 2008).

The fourth problem concerns a misalignment of effort and intent. The deep inequality that development would solve is caused by actors that development workers cannot affect: the business policies of Western governments and transnational corporations. This point is argued most convincingly by Thomas Pogge in a series of books and papers. He argues (2004) that while rendering *assistance* to the destitute is a laudable positive duty, it is secondary to a negative duty of *noninterference*. This is because the West is the reason that nearly half the world is destitute, not merely as a result of colonial exploitation, but by our everyday practices and lifestyles that continue to cause lasting harm. As Thomas Nagel (1977) also makes clear, it makes a major moral difference if the “foul play” of oppressors is ongoing or past. If it belongs only to the past, repa-

ration and assistance are the name of the game; if it is ongoing, cessation of harm is the top priority.

Consider two illustrations. The old saying goes that if you give a man a fish you feed him for a day, but if you teach him how to fish you feed him for a lifetime. Direct humanitarian assistance in the style of Peter Singer (1972)—who advocates a large redistribution of material wealth for morally utilitarian reasons—does the former, while development efforts typically try to do the latter. But both are gross misunderstandings of the current state of the world. A better analogy is that Western business elites take all the fish in the water, or sink all the fishing boats, cast a net so large that no other nets can be cast. In a similar illustration, which I borrow and adapt from David Miller (2001), if I see a person who has been harmed and is in great pain, I have a *prima facie* duty to offer assistance; but if *I* am the one who harmed that person, it is silly to insist that I discharge my duty of assistance, especially if I continue to kick her back down each time she tries to get up. Two entitlements of the person were violated: her positive right to receive assistance in times of need and her negative right to not be the recipient of harmful action. It is clear that my most serious violation of her rights is to have harmed her and to continue harming her, not to have failed to help her. In like fashion, Western nations must first stop harming the global poor before launching crusades to assist them in unproductive ways. The kind of harm that I am primarily concerned with is the deprivation of agency, so the rest of this section illustrates how international trade agreements harm the global poor by depriving them of their agency.

One way in which Western-dominated business practices harm the rest of the world is through foreign investment of Western-based transnational corporations. Robinson (2009) argues that the increasing mobility of corporate capital and the increasing reliance on financial rather than productive/manufacturing business have created a *de facto* transnational corporate class that is far less accountable than earlier capitalists to the pressure of governing bodies and (importantly) of the working classes. In formerly Third World economies, this process has created two different but related relations of economic exploitation. In some cases, frequent in Southeast Asia and Central America, investment by transnational firms into local manufacturing and processing plants directly employs local workers who are paid meager salaries to perform jobs in inhumane conditions, with little or no possibility of appeal or governmental protection (???). In other cases, frequent in many NAFTA countries (see, for example, Gonzalez 2001 and Maquila 2001), transnational firms purchase local firms and violate local labor and environmental laws to maximize profit, counting on the fact that local governments are powerless to enforce their own laws because of adherence to NAFTA regulations. In all these cases, workers and their families—who already live in countries impoverished enough to be a tempting investment target for transnational firms—take the further brunt of these economic transactions designed to favor transnational capitalists, with little or no possibility of resort. Similar exploitation relations exist to the detriment of many women in developing countries (Dunaway 2001) and of migrant workers everywhere (Bannerjee 2001; Schiller 2000).

Another way that Western business harms the global economy in ways that place it outside the reach of well-meaning NGOs and development workers is through what Pogge (2008; 2010) calls the *international resource privilege*. In all countries, access to natural resources is easier and more lucrative for those in positions of power, whether public or private. Thus, in resource-rich lands like Nigeria (oil) and Eritrea (gas), political power guarantees a rich bounty. In part because of this, and in part due to the arbitrary partitioning of Africa by Europeans, these areas are also highly politically volatile. When combined, these factors result in a precarious balance.

Rival parties, armies, and clans seek political power not for the benefit of their citizens (most of whom are not “theirs” in any significant social sense anyway), but to attain the privilege of access to natural resources. The only way to monetize natural resources in such deeply impoverished economies is to sell; the only way to sell is to those who can afford to buy; and those who can afford to buy are not local, but prominent international and transnational powers like Western governments and corporations. Thus, those who gain local power and the resource privilege become economic actors in international markets by selling resources gained through violence (Pogge 2008). Real-world examples of these relations can be seen especially in Nigeria (*The Economist* 1996; Gylfason 2000), though many developing countries with the so-called “resource curse” or “Dutch disease” exhibit similar patterns (UNDP 2003: 278-81).

At least two parties benefit from this system and at least one party does not. The first beneficiary is the seller, who sits on (sometimes literal) piles of gold and can afford inexpensive production with no concern for welfare and labor justice. The second beneficiary is the buyer, who by turning a blind eye to the methods of resource procurement enjoys vast amounts of resources at comparatively cheap prices, while also guaranteeing the maintenance of profitable trade agreements; Wenar (2008) compares this practice to effectively “stealing,” which on moral grounds it is. The only ones not to benefit from this arrangement are the majority of individuals who live and work in resource-rich lands. First, their homes become ravaged by war, displacement, sickness, and famine, which are side effects of the struggle for the attainment of the resource privilege. Second, the ruling elites have no interest to fix this situation and would rather employ their resources to the advantage of the few who are ethnically or politically related to them (and often to purchase the arms that keep them in power, often sold by the same Western powers with whom they have trade agreements; see Shah 2013 for a discussion). Insofar as Westerners exploit this system by acting as buyers, they are directly co-responsible for the suffering of millions, along with the local holders of various resource privileges. More precisely, they are directly co-responsible for the deep poverty of wealth and opportunity resulting from the violent appropriation of natural resources and their unilateral monetization through Western purchase for the benefit of small elites. The main source of deep deprivation is thus neither entirely local nor entirely global, but “glocal.”

This argument, if accepted, shows that the institutions that development workers are able to affect are causally nearly irrelevant to the deprivation that they combat. Cattle management techniques and better irrigation systems are but temporary remedies. Even the more politically involved efforts, such as community activism and organization, will fail to bring about any significant change in the lives of the deeply impoverished unless they are coupled with efforts to diminish the impact of the resource privilege *on both ends*. On the local end, socioeconomics ought to be radically restructured and moved away from a system where rival parties compete for the resource privilege. On the global end, rich buyers from the West must be held accountable for their complicity in these trading practices. The average NGO cannot accomplish either task. It can, at most and if it is well financed and connected, affect the local level by exerting political influence on the current ruler, but that will do no good if the political climate remains fractioned along the non-national, non-institutional, non-economic lines of tribalism.

These remarks allow us to understand the problems that plague many development projects. Some of these issues are conceptual, so in the next section I will outline a conception of development that is adequately sociopolitical, nonracist, and non-paternalistic. Some other issues are political and practical, so in the final section I will lay out some directions for Western development efforts to follow in the future. The resulting picture is one where poor economies regain as

much of their pre-colonial independent agency as possible given the circumstances, even if the long-term outcome of the exercise of such agency may be disagreeable to Western majorities.

## II. Development as agency: a modified capability approach

Amartya Sen (1980, 1988, 1994, 2009) defines “development” as a marked increase in the actual quality of life of citizens more than in wealth and industrialization. While money does matter, mere increases in either GDP or GNP (either total or per capita) say very little about distribution and access to goods and services that are purchasable by wealth, or about the different abilities of citizens to convert wealth into a better life. Likewise, increases in life expectancy and decreases in infant mortality and fertility do not necessarily correlate positively with wealth. Thus, our assessment of a nation’s development ought not to correspond with its wealth, as the early writers in development economics in the 1940s and 1950s often believed (Sen 1988). Sen argues that a developed society is one where people have sufficient *capability*. Capability is the set of all functionings that are realistically available to a person. Functionings are “the doings and beings of a person,” the prospective life paths among which we can freely and reasonably choose according to the personal, social, and cultural expectations of the place where we live. It would be easy to associate this view to the literature on “equality of opportunity,” but that is not quite what Sen means. Surely a society with great equality of opportunity, where all or nearly all functionings are actually open to all or nearly all persons, is a society where people enjoy great capability. But capability is more than mere opportunity. It is, first, the *ability* to achieve prospective life paths: physical, psychological, and nutritional. Second, it is the capacity to *self-determine* life paths in accordance with one’s social milieu (history, culture, tradition, religion) and personal circumstance (needs, desires, ambitions). Third, it is the legal and institutional *freedom* to achieve that path, both as noninterference and as enabling assistance. And fourth, it is the *actual and realistic availability* of life paths within a society, namely the very existence of those paths in the first place.

The first two requirements are about individual persons; the latter two are about societies. The fourth one is especially prominent in Sen’s theory. A society is developed not only when it is richer, or when it is more democratic, or when fewer of its people die, but when there are *in fact* things that people can reasonably do if they want to. How many things and what kinds of things depends on what the people in fact do want: Sen is not saying that a society where people can realistically hope to become astronauts is more developed than one where space travel does not exist. Whatever one’s standards be for the realization of personally and socially meaningful life paths, those life paths must be available, their availability must be realistic (not requiring heroism and placing oneself in mortal danger), and the social institutions must be designed to facilitate and not hinder their achievement. This view is compatible with industrial capitalist societies like Japan and the USA as well as with all kinds of rural economies, because the central desideratum remains the same across the board: the realistic availability of life functionings. It is clear, then, that wealth will still play a role on this view, if for no other reason than to achieve sufficient capability one must have reasonable access to water, food, shelter, and sanitation, and money is instrumental in procuring those. This is why even this approach may require a substantial redistribution of the existing wealth, an issue that I discuss in the next section. But wealth is still not of primary conceptual importance to development and should not be taken as the standard unit of development assessments. Wealth does no good in a society without an infrastructure that enables citizens to convert wealth into primary goods safely and reliably. Well-meaning

Westerners who endorse a “just give them the money” approach to development (Kestenbaum 2013) frequently ignore that the recipients of direct cash transfers often do not buy their water and food, but painstakingly cultivate or walk through war zones to obtain them; or that the nearest Wal-Mart is not a few towns away but a few continents away. The identification of the quality of life with wealth is a delusion of the wealthy.

Sen’s view of development is picked up by Martha Nussbaum, who builds a theory of international justice in a series of works starting in the mid-1990s. If we accept Sen’s definition of capability, Nussbaum thinks that substantial agreement exists among all peoples concerning which capabilities are not renounceable. If sufficient intercultural dialogue is allowed, we will soon discover a rich overlapping consensus on the basic capabilities that we want defended and enforced. Other philosophers, such as Kwame Appiah (2007) and Charles Taylor (2008), also think that consensus is possible, though that it may be too fickle for meaningful international cooperation. Nussbaum disagrees. She thinks that the very framework of capabilities, which ensures respect for self-determination and diversity, will ensure a thick agreement on a large number of issues. (Here we should note that Nussbaum pluralizes “capability” to “capabilities,” which in my view does not fully capture the extent of Sen’s original concept. Capability is the graduated measurement of the opportunity and realistic availability of life paths, so there is only one capability, not multiple. At most, there are factors that positively contribute to increasing one’s capability. To avoid confusion, I will refer to what Nussbaum calls “capabilities” as capability enablers, basic human functions that, if guaranteed, increase capability).

It is not necessary to report the entire list of Nussbaum’s enablers, nor to discuss them in detail.<sup>1</sup> They range from bodily health and integrity to association and practical reason, comprising all the usual factors that increase our quality of life and the ability to attain the goals that we set for ourselves. Nussbaum, like Sen, also places a strong emphasis on the self-determination of life paths. Capability enablers are *multiply realizable*, meaning that each can be instantiated in a variety of ways depending on culture, history, tradition, and socioeconomic status. They may be ranked differently, given different weights, instantiated by different entities at different times, receiving more or less cultural publicity, etc. In the full spirit of Sen’s approach, Nussbaum’s theory leaves individuals and communities free to “fill out” the substantive content of capability enablers within a generally liberal framework. Self-determination is thus guaranteed.

With that said, the fact that the framework is liberal is undeniable. After all, this approach is devised by two prominent liberal theorists who work squarely within the liberal American academic tradition and speak to an audience of liberals. Even if the usual staples of liberal theory are not individually ranked as capability enablers—freedom, liberty, rights, opportunity—the general spirit of the list is to ensure *personal*, not social, autonomy. Sen emphasizes *self*-determination of life paths, and all the capability enablers in Nussbaum’s list are decidedly individualistic, requiring *personal* decision-making and the ultimate authority of the individual. But what about societies that are not quite so individualistic? Here I am not talking about certain European or far Eastern societies where individuality and commonality are both held in high regard; there is little problem with those. But it is easy to imagine strongly tribal or traditional groups where the very concept of a *person* is inextricably tied to the concept of a *group*. The view that each person is unique and has personal deliberative power is a non-neutral normative commitment that Sen and

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<sup>1</sup> Clear and concise discussions of ‘capabilities’ appear in the papers “Human Capabilities, Female Human Beings” (1995) and “Capabilities and Human Rights” (1997). A more recent and less technical take is in *Creating Capabilities: The Human Development Approach* (2011). Nussbaum and Sen have also co-edited a volume: *The Quality of Life* (1993).

Nussbaum take for granted. Conversely, a society may claim that its members lack the “right” or the “expertise” to make capability decisions for themselves concerning association, practical reason, or even bodily integrity, and that the group, or tradition, knows best. Hence, despite Nussbaum’s assurance that the list was derived through extensive dialogue with men, women, and children from a large variety of cultures, concerns remain about its moral commitments. The problem is not just academic. If capability is to underwrite the ideal conception of development as agency, which in turn will inform policy decisions, these objections cast serious doubt on its fitness for such a task.

One way to respond is by sidelining the objection. Very few societies actually conceive of persons in such hierarchical and illiberal ways, and we should be contented with an approach that captures most, even if not all, of the world’s social groups. As I have no data on the matter, I will ignore this possibility. A similar way out is to accept the fact that such deeply conservative societies are simply not appropriate targets for this theory, and thus they and their members should be ignored, even if they should be numerous. While tempting, I do not think that this is adequate. Rawlsians may have no problem with it, for they could silence those societies by claiming that their comprehensive doctrines are unreasonable because they do not support a freestanding political conception of justice, which mandates personal autonomy in a Kantian kingdom of ends. But the capability approach supposedly applies to the entire world, not merely to those who already hold deep considered convictions about freedom and democracy, so the problem is not quite so easily avoided.

A more promising way to rebut the objection is to emphasize that capability enablers can be multiply realized not only personally but also socially. In partial but important disagreement with Sen and Nussbaum, we may claim that *agency is not only a desirable feature of individuals, but also a collective asset of cultures*. Changing the normative unit from person to persons, from individual to cultural determination, does not endanger the rest of the theoretical framework: there is enough normative leeway with enablers to allow each community to define for itself both the manner of their fulfillment and the degree of autonomy of its members. We do not need to invent a theory of person-group relations: each group already has those relations figured out by the natural act of its formation *as a group*. If so, what we need is to devise a theory to assess the development of both individualistic and collectivist societies by a common set of theoretical tools.

Of course, a major downside of a modified capability approach based on collective agency is that it must allow groups whose values are not just nonliberal but illiberal (sexist, racist, homophobic) to subsist as they will. This is an unsurprising consequence of the renunciation of full-blown liberalism: the more free agency one recognizes in others, the more one must be willing to accept that they use it in ways inimical to liberalism. After all, liberalism does not hold a monopoly on freedom, but is just one specific partitioning of the limits of freedom. These worries may be partly allayed by remembering that the theory already has some “checks” built into it: enablers must be beneficial to *all persons*, even if within the cultural constraints defined by society, in the same way that hyper-individualistic theories allow great freedom to individual persons but only compatibly with the same freedoms for everyone else. And while the capability approach does not make explicit a commitment to reciprocal equality, chances are that most communities will independently choose some form of reciprocity. If they should not, the capability approach will have no more to say. I will return to this point at the end of the next section, for it is precisely this lack of assuredness that developing economies will follow the sociopolitical path of the liberal West that underwrites the importance of their free collective agency.

### III. The selective non-involvement of Western agents

Like blueprints to buildings, conceptions of development are indispensable for construction but provide no shelter. A crucial step is to outline the practical ways that development as capability can influence Western international policy at the broadest levels. I will make three proposals and show how they can increase capability.

Western nation-states, Western-based transnational corporations and organizations, and Western individuals ought to:

- (i) Discontinue trade practices that exploit the inhabitants of poor economies.
- (ii) Discontinue non-ethnographic development work to allow locals to demarcate their own social and political landscapes conducive to capability, according to local culture and need.
- (iii) Discontinue most non-emergency humanitarian aid, save for certain resources and cash, and always strictly depending on recipient requests.

The main rationale for all three proposals is the same: development as agency requires that communities determine the worth of functionings and life goals by themselves, since it is their members who will ultimately take advantage of them. So all Western interference in poor economies that hinders the determination and achievement of these functionings must cease. Conversely, Western assistance that helps toward self-determination must continue, but only according to the needs, policies, and requests of the inhabitants of poor economies. The West cannot export self-determination in any way, nor can it “restore” agency (it would be a contradiction in terms), but it must assist in its advancement when asked to do so.

As for (i), and as already discussed in the previous section, how would the cessation of unfair global trade restore socioeconomic agency to the deeply destitute? The recent model of “fair trade” is adequate in theory, despite the shortcomings of the eponymous NGO. It requires active participation by two actors. One is Western consumers, who ought to purchase goods that were not produced by slave labor or human rights violations. Many nonpartisan advocacy groups exist whose goal is to research the business practices of American corporations; Fair Trade itself is one; Global Trade Watch is another; on a more local level (for this author), Virginia Tech students have recently developed mobile software for this exact purpose (Williams et al. 2013). The second actor is Western businesses and corporations themselves, who ought to refrain from employing slave labor and trading with sellers who have taken advantage of resource privileges by engaging in human rights violations. Examples abound. The Bangladeshi factory that collapsed in Savar in 2013 and killed 1,129 people was arguably hosting shops that manufactured clothes for Western firms like Wal-Mart and Benetton (Greenhouse 2013), and there has been much speculation about Apple’s labor policies in China (Cooper 2013). Conversely, businesses that brand themselves as “local” are more likely to avoid these problems, though of course they may run into others—dishonest marketing, elitism, and domestic slave labor—that are not within the scope of this paper.

Though change will not come easily, this approach to international trade has the potential to exert great positive impact on local capability and agency. Western reluctance to engage in trade based on illicit appropriation of resources will diminish the appeal of such appropriation in the first place. In Pogge’s terms, it takes two to do the wrong thing, a seller and a buyer, and with fewer buyers it is reasonable to believe that there will be fewer sellers. This will in turn raise the living conditions of those who occupy those lands, as one major cause of war, displacement, and

famine will be lessened with the waning of the benefit of various resource privileges. The point is not that Westerners are moral heroes who must teach warlords right from wrong by withdrawing from unfair transactions; rather, the point is that there would be fewer such transactions in the first place without the culpable willingness of Western actors to meddle in the economies and internal affairs of other societies for monetary gain. Likewise, this is not a call to impose liberal moral standards on the governments and businesses of other societies; instead, it is a call for *our* moral standards to regulate *our* interactions with those institutions, and there is nothing imperialistic, racist, or morally paternalistic in that. Respecting the agency of others does not require becoming subordinate to their business ethics, nor to withhold moral judgment about them. It merely means to cease *our* part in the wrongdoing, with an understanding that since it takes two to do wrong, one's cessation is likely to influence another's.

None the less, a common objection is that even if "we" (which usually means the U.S. or Europe) refrain from trading with non-Western elites, "somebody else" will (which usually means China, Russia, or other preferred scapegoats of Western liberals), so why even bother. The fallacy in that argument should be evident: morally speaking, it amounts to little more than "everybody at school is bullying the weak kid, so it is okay for me to bully the weak kid too." A more interesting objection is that the progressive discontinuation of unfair global trade will cause even more local turmoil. As the value of the resource privilege fades, rival parties will vie over other things: ethnic supremacy, history, local politics, the appropriation of whatever meager resources the land still has, etc. Westerners but have to look in their own backyard to know that when peoples are divided they will find virtually any reason to fight each other. If this objection is right, poor economies will not change how resources are monetized abroad, but instead descend deeper into deprivation as resources remain untapped and unsold. While this may seem reckless, it is but one more face of self-determination. Westerners are clearly responsible for the harm caused by their direct interference, but it is far from obvious that they are equally responsible for the harm caused by the *cessation* of their interference. If self-determination is to be the most valued virtue, unpleasant consequences such as this just might follow in the end (though if my other proposals are right, especially [iii] concerning aid and reparation, it is unlikely that they will follow at all).

Proposals (ii) and (iii) are closely related to this latter worry, and they should be discussed together because they also raise another common problem. On one hand, a good way to ensure capability is through wealth redistribution and the creation of opportunity-granting, fair politics; on the other hand, these steps must be carried out without pernicious Western intervention, given the obstacles discussed in the first section. In other words, and while keeping proposal (i) in place, if the West completely withholds assistance, the global destitute may plunge yet deeper into misery; but if the West assists too much or wrongly, capability also may not increase, for we have seen how intrusive development efforts are doomed to fail. So what is the right measure? Which moral, political, and practical criteria can tell us what we ought to do?

Part of the answer depends on what we mean by "assistance." As Barnett (2011) shows, foreign aid ranges from disaster relief to debt cancellation, direct cash transfers to institutions or individuals, and material assistance in the form of development aid. We saw how wealth is of little consequence without infrastructures to convert it to primary goods, but it is still helpful, both in societies where such infrastructure exists and in those where it is being developed or expanded. So while not all assistance ought to consist of wealth, not all wealth transfers ought to be discontinued. The developing world needs a lot of money and that must not change. What must change is the manner of delivery, the recipients, and the nature of economic relations contingent on the continuation of aid. Likewise, as the agency required for the determination of capability

cannot be imposed from without, following Ferguson's *mētis* we must keep in mind that local populations already know what is best for them: what they want to do, should do, and how they plan on achieving it. There is literally nothing that Westerners could "teach" or "show" that they do not already know (and, of course, there is much that Westerners *would* teach or show that locals do not know but also do not need or want).

These remarks suggest a possible criterion to regulate Western intervention: *to do all and only what is asked of us*. Provide money, resources, labor, and logistic assistance not as "needed" according to a Western conception of need (and surely not according to the profitable needs of transnational corporations), but merely as asked; not as required, but as requested; not as we will, but as they will. At the principled level, this is simple: we should go everywhere we are wanted and nowhere we are not. If our money and resources are requested we must deliver (compatibly with our moral assessment of those who request them), for both us Westerners and our ancestors have brought about much of this misery in the first place. And herein lies the resolution to the conflict between (ii) and (iii). Whereas a fairly objective assessment of financial need is possible, the same is false for practical and political need. In other words, when it comes to whether or how we should intervene in the development of poor economies, the will of their citizens should be the ultimate authority and the baseline criterion for our foreign development policies.

Underlying this argument is a belief in the social self-determination of those who have been colonized by the West and who are now further oppressed by our economic policies. There is no sure way to undo the damage. The collective consciousness of the colonized was forever scarred by the act of colonization, and whatever arrangement comes next will be imperfect. The scarring is not only cultural and psychological, but concerns agency as well. The agency of indigenous populations in the pre-colonial world no longer exists and is, by definition, irreplaceable. Whatever anyone does now, their agency as it would have been without colonization is gone. Thus, at least, the West can get out of the way and allow as much self-determining autonomy as is possible *from now on*. This, I argue, is the best chance for the attainment of increased capability in the ways described by both Sen and Nussbaum, though at the social and not at the individual level. Of course, the primary source of resistance to this argument on the part of Western actors is that the resulting global arrangement may be very hostile to the West. If we are to believe theorists like Frantz Fanon (1961), some non-Western cultures may eventually deliberate out of their free agency that it is in their best interest to kill Westerners, or to insurrect and liberate themselves by violence, or to think that the best way to decolonization is reverse colonization. I will not dwell on those options here, save for saying that they do not strike me as improbable or necessarily wrong. Be that as it may, the restitution of as much agency as possible where it belongs is the least—and also the most—that the West can do, and that should be all that we mean by "development."

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