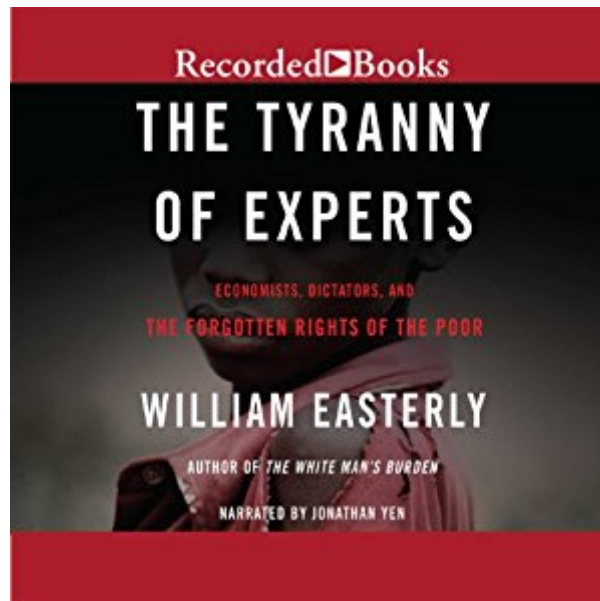


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The Tyranny Of Experts: Economists, Dictators, And The Forgotten Rights Of The Poor



Synopsis

Over the last century, global poverty has largely been viewed as a technical problem that merely requires the right "expert" solutions. Yet all too often, experts recommend solutions that fix immediate problems without addressing the systemic political factors that created them in the first place. Further, they produce an accidental collusion with "benevolent autocrats", leaving dictators with yet more power to violate the rights of the poor. In *The Tyranny of Experts*, economist William Easterly, best-selling author of *The White Man's Burden*, traces the history of the fight against global poverty, showing not only how these tactics have trampled the individual freedom of the world's poor, but how in doing so have suppressed a vital debate about an alternative approach to solving poverty: freedom. Presenting a wealth of cutting-edge economic research, Easterly argues that only a new model of development - one predicated on respect for the individual rights of people in developing countries, that understands that unchecked state power is the problem and not the solution - will be capable of ending global poverty once and for all.

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Customer Reviews

William Easterly, an economics professor at NYU, has written several iconoclastic books on economic development. His latest book is his best, in my view. The book provides a history of development policy from the early twentieth century onward. Easterly analyzes how what he labels "authoritarian development policy" -- state-run, top-down policy -- came to dominate the field of development so thoroughly. Easterly sees the consequences of this dominance as being tragic, with

governments and their hired experts having run roughshod over the interests of poor people. His book provides many examples of callous remarks by development officials dismissing the hardships their policies have imposed on people whose lives were plenty hard enough to begin with. Easterly is skeptical of the technocratic, data-driven policies that Bill Gates has been associated with in recent years, doubting the reliability of both the data these policies are based on and the rosy assessments of the outcomes of the policies. Easterly worked for years at the World Bank and had a ringside seat at the formulation and implementation of the Bank's policies, most of which he now sees as ineffective and, often, counterproductive. He certainly has the credentials to make these arguments; it will be interesting to see what counterarguments the development policy establishment makes. I would hate to think that Easterly's arguments will be ignored, but he notes that similar arguments in the past have been. Much as I like the book, I do have a few caveats. I like the fact that the book is fairly brief and very readable -- I probably wouldn't have read it if it hadn't been! -- but the scholarship seemed a trifle thin to me.

The Tyranny of Experts is a good read, and I recommend it to anyone interested in economic development and political change (specifically democratization). Although at times his prose comes across as overly pedagogical, Easterly's writing is entertaining as he pulls together various development histories ranging widely across time - from Northern Italy's free cities in 1154 A.D. to the British Empire in the early 20th Century to Uganda in 2010. The central argument is that the development community that has engaged the "developing world" since the end of World War II (specifically from Truman's initiation of post-war foreign aid in 1949) has focused on economic growth to the exclusion of political rights for the people in countries that are being developed. According to Easterly, development experts have made three critical mistakes: (1) development programs have treated countries/cultures as if they are "blank slates," ignoring specific historical circumstances and dynamics; (2) policies and measurement of "development" have focused on the national level, whereas development may be at the same time more localized (progress taking place within specific communities) as well as more regional (the broader economic/environmental/social setting of development clearly has a strong regional component) than this analysis acknowledges; and (3) development experts have chosen to consciously design solutions to problems, whereas historically a free market has been the best problem-solver. To make his point, Easterly examines a broad range of statistics, anecdotes, documents and quotes from development experts and organizations.

This book is full of surprises. In *The Tyranny of Experts*, the author of the seminal book *The White Man's Burden* drills down into the history of economic development around the world in search of its causes. What he finds has little to do with any of the factors bandied about among contemporary development professionals. "The conventional approach to economic development, to making poor countries rich," William Easterly writes, "is based on a technocratic illusion: the belief that poverty is a purely technical problem amenable to such technical solutions as fertilizers, antibiotics, or nutritional supplements . . . The technocratic approach ignores what this book will establish as the real cause of poverty — the unchecked power of the state against poor people without rights." Instead, Easterly maintains, the fundamental pre-condition for successful development is democracy paired with deep understanding of local history. He calls the establishment of the World Bank "the moment of original sin . . . in which the Bank disavowed the ideals of freedom . . ." Academia has been good to William Easterly. Presumably, when he was forced out of the World Bank because of his outspoken criticism of the Bank's support for corrupt regimes and pro-Western favoritism, he was looking for a platform on which he could continue his campaign to shift the consensus among development professionals from top-down "solutions" to support for bottom-up, grassroots initiatives. He's gotten that platform, but his position on the faculty of New York University has also moved him to dig more deeply into the intellectual roots of his thinking. *The Tyranny of Experts* is one result. This book is intellectually very ambitious.

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