

LECTURE ABSTRACT

The Whole Beast: Towards a More Holistic Approach to Development

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Today's development thinking is dominated by the neo-liberal view – an individualist worldview that gives priority to private property rights over other rights, strongly believes in the efficacy of the market, mistrusts the state (and other collectivist organisations, like trade unions), and believes international economic interactions to be almost definitionally positive for all parties involved.

This view of development, however, leaves too many important things out of the discussion (which I call 'selectivity bias') and judges things on a narrow philosophical basis ('individualistic bias'). In this lecture, I will discuss how we need to bring in things that are not discussed or are 'beautified' in the mainstream development discourse while overcoming the individualistic bias of the discourse.

The first aspect of the selectivity bias is in the presentation of history. First, the history of domination and exploitation through colonialism, unequal treaties, and unfree labour (slavery, indentured labour, etc.) is almost completely written out of the history of development. Second, the virtues of Western – especially Anglo-American (political and economic) institutions and (scientific and business) culture are exaggerated, thereby implicitly justifying the West's 'triumph' over the economically weaker nations. Third, the interventionist and protectionist history of development policies used by the West is re-written so that the mainstream argument for free market and free trade are presented as the only way through which development has been achieved. Fourth, the history of development in today's developing countries is also re-written in such a way that the periods state-led development are

presented as unmitigated disasters while the poor economic performance during the neo-liberal period is not mentioned.

The second aspect of the selectivity bias is in leaving out 'gritty' things that reveal the complicated and/or conflictual nature of the development process. First, the production process itself is rarely discussed, thereby giving the wrong impression that exchange through the market is what is driving the development process. Second, work – especially the power relationship and control that exist in the 'labour process' – is written out of economics, which means that things like working conditions, dignity at workplaces, etc. are not even serious topics of discussion. Third, power is talked about in a partial and skewed way, creating the false impression that development is a largely harmonious process. Little is said of the structural power that comes from the imbalances in income and wealth and even less is said of the 'ideational power' – the ability to make people think what you want them to think.

The individualistic bias in the philosophical framework behind today's mainstream discourse on development is most importantly manifested in the idea of Pareto improvement that is at the foundation of Neoclassical economics. Most importantly, by proposing that no social change can be called an improvement unless it hurts no one (while making some better off), this philosophical position lends an extremely strong bias towards the status quo – or the existing distribution of income, wealth, and power. While we don't want to swing to the other extreme and adopt an outright collectivist view, we need to accept that we cannot make judgements in a complex world with differing views on the basis of a single philosophical position.

I will conclude my talk by arguing that we need to talk about development in a more holistic way and with a broader range of philosophical positions. In the same way in which using all parts of a plant or an animal – and not just tenderest of the leaves or 'choice' cuts of meat – is better for our health and the environment, it is better to think about development in a way that does not leave out 'gritty' bits and does not beautify 'unpleasant' things. In the same way in which having a broader range of palate lets us enjoy a more varied and exciting diet, it is better to think about development with a more varied range of philosophical positions.