
A New Paradigm of Development

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REVIEW OF AMARTYA SEN, *Development as Freedom*

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That development should be measured by a more sophisticated analytical tool than simple measurements of GNP is certainly not a novel idea, nor critique, of development economics. What sets Amartya Sen's *Development as Freedom* apart from others in the development field is his deceptively simple argument: Economic development expands the range of options for substantive freedoms. The forms of freedom about which Sen is primarily concerned are political freedoms, economic facilities, social opportunities, transparency guarantees and protective security. These freedoms are linked, reciprocal and causal, both a primary means and a principal end to a holistic vision of human welfare and capability.

The importance of Sen's work extends well beyond the so-called dismal science of economics to encompass philosophy, social and political theory. Yet what is perhaps the most striking element of Sen's thoughtful work is his profound sense of humanity. It is in this universalistic spirit that Sen follows in the footsteps of Bengali poet Rabindranath Tagore, who so eloquently wrote: "Whatever we understand and enjoy in human products instantly becomes ours, wherever they might have their origin. I am proud of my humanity when I can acknowledge the poets and artists of other countries as my own. Let me feel with unalloyed gladness that the great glories of man are mine."¹ *Development as Freedom* poignantly challenges conventional development thinking to rise to a superior level of agency, participation and human dignity.

Amartya Sen, who was named *Amartya*, immortal, by Rabindranath Tagore,² revisits the intellectual contributions of some of the greatest thinkers by demonstrating the age-old universal concern with freedom and its corollaries (such as health, education, security and justice). From King Ashoka to Aristotle

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to Adam Smith, Sen communicates with remarkable ease both the central and esoteric teachings of these thinkers. However, his work is not principally about the ideas of others. Rather (as in part indicated by his receipt of the Nobel Prize in economics in 1998), it is a unique contribution in its own right. A review of the key concepts of *Development as Freedom* situates them within the conventional development paradigm and illustrates the degree to which this book contributes fresh thinking to the field.

While no single factor can probably ever explain the motivation to undertake the writing and research of any lengthy scholarly work, Sen's work clearly is a reaction to the "hard-knocks" attitude that development could, and perhaps should, proceed without primary attention to basic civil and political rights (or the so-called Lee thesis, named after Lee Kuan Yew, former prime minister of Singapore). Sen painstakingly rebukes this view as both empirically unfounded and ethically untenable. In his view, development is not—simply put—about delayed political or social gratification. Freedoms, in political, social, and economic dimensions, are both constitutive and instrumental in a process of development.

In the chapter entitled, "Poverty as Capability Deprivation," Sen introduces us to some of his most compelling arguments: relative deprivation in incomes as yielding absolute deprivation in capability (a thesis particularly relevant to developed economies), the psychological and real impact of unemployment, and the startling evidence of 100 million and more women "missing" from the world due to a combination of economic, but primarily cultural prejudices that condone the "neglect of female health and nutrition, especially—but not exclusively – during childhood."³ His concern for gender and race relations, in particular, transcends conventional thinking. Not only does Sen identify the economic causes of such inequalities (his thesis of "missing women" points out that the comparison is made against mortality rates of women in sub-Saharan Africa, not the developed world), but he also demonstrates that poverty as capability deprivation is also socially determined—much in the same way that racism is. When considering some of the more general arguments that poor countries are unable to provide basic needs such as health care and education, Sen counters that poor countries, while not necessarily endowed with economic resources, are able to take advantage of relatively cheap labor costs, and thus at the very least should be able to provide more services with fewer financial resources.

Sen devotes an entire chapter to democracy, which he argues is intrinsically important, instrumental, and constructive to a process of development. Here again, Sen takes up the "hard-knocks" view, and posits that democracy, and its expression in public debate, political and civil rights, is a critical component of sustainable development. Again, some might argue that Sen's views are far from original, as a number of modern and pre-modern theorists have maintained a

similar thesis, however, as is true for most of this book, his credibility lies in his particular presentation of details and facts.

To this end, for instance, he invokes the example of China's use of coercive methods to reduce population growth. This policy has led to not only devastating social consequences, but has not achieved the same level of voluntary population reductions as evidenced by the socially responsible policies of Kerala, India. Sen's discussion of democracy leads directly into a chapter on "Famines and Other Crises," in which he reiterates his core thesis that no democratic nation has (nor ever will) produce a famine, however poor it may be. This thesis forcefully elevates democracy to a matter of life and death. It is not, as Sen has shown, simply food output or shortages that create famines, but rather gross inequality in income and power. The prevention of famines is thus to be remedied not simply by an increase in food availability (although in the short term this may be necessary to avert a humanitarian crisis) but by the assurance of political freedoms to express public outcry and drive change.

In "Culture and Human Rights," perhaps the weakest chapter of the book, Sen focuses on debunking myths, such as the "Asian Values" stereotype, that are responsible for condoning authoritarian and other types of non-democratic governance. However, his discussion pays too little attention to the impact of globalization upon cultures. Although Sen concedes that the threat to native cultures is *inescapable*, he writes,

My point is not at all to argue against the unique importance of each culture, but rather to plead in favor of the need for some sophistication in understanding cross-cultural influences as well as our basic ability to enjoy products of other cultures and other lands. We must not lose our ability to understand one another and to enjoy the cultural products of different countries in the passionate advocacy of conservation and purity.⁴

In light of this statement, how are we to understand this process of cultural exchange? Does it, as it seems to be implied in the term *products*, mean that cultural exchanges will come to rely increasingly upon the commodification of culture (influenced directly by a process of globalization and homogenization)? One can only hope that in Sen's conception of the universal value of freedom, we may find, if need be, a way to correct the seemingly *irreversibility* of cultural adaptation to the modern world.

In subsequent chapters, Sen squarely takes on the issue of self-interest. He argues that self-interest, although it may be the driving (though not solitary) force behind capitalism, produces important unintended consequences. Adam Smith explained that dinner is made possible by the individual interests of the baker, butcher, and brewer—yet, as Sen points out, these individual interests are dependent upon a system of trust, reliability and business honesty. Consequently,

effective public institutions and active civic participation in developing market economies are considered by Sen to be keystones of the development process.

Development as Freedom is, in the simplest terms, a book that takes a “capabilities approach” to development. From this standpoint, freedom in its most glorious forms is instrumental to and a primary end of development. There are a number of ways in which we could critique Sen’s work; in addition to the gaps in the cultural analysis above, it would be tempting, if superficial, to criticize his often repetitive and verbose style. Yet it seems petty to level such charges against such an erudite thinker.

In closing a book devoted to the freedom of human beings from worldly suffering, I am reminded of the Buddhist metaphor of the lotus, a flower whose beauty and growth develops in the muddy waters of the lake. The muddy waters, it is said, are a reminder that suffering is at once the motivation and cause for liberation. While I would suspect few economists would ever concede to such putatively fatalistic thinking, I am left to wonder to what extent our experience of suffering becomes a prophesy fulfilled by a never-ending desire to accumulate more. Would it not be more useful to escape these bonds of material attachment? Or, is it, as Gandhi repeatedly demonstrated in his fasts, that *choice* rather than *subjection* makes human agency and dignity possible. This reflection aside, Sen’s book remains in its deservedly noble place as the work of an economist who, in the words of the Nobel Prize committee, “restored an ethical dimension to the discussion of vital economic problems.”⁵ ■

NOTES

¹ From Rabindranath Tagore, *Letters to a Friend* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1928).

² Akash Kapur, “A Third Way for the Third World,” *The Atlantic Monthly*, December 1999.

³ Amartya Sen, *Development as Freedom* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1999), 106.

⁴ Sen, 244.

⁵ From the Royal Swedish Academy Announcement of the Award of the 1998 Nobel Prize in Economic Science.