RENDERING POLITICS LEGIBLE IN DEVELOPMENT: CAN THE ANTI-POLITICS MACHINE BE DISMANTLED?

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ABSTRACT

This paper provides a theoretical-conceptual investigation of the new politics of development agenda and evaluates the possibility of making development more political. Drawing on Scott, Schmitt, Weber, Horkheimer & Adorno, and the critical development literature, the paper argues that depoliticization must be seen in terms of the way that the 'political' and the 'technical' are constructed as a cognitive gap in the inner frame of the development planner. That which is known to the planner is ipso facto 'technical', whereas that which is not is 'politics'. Politics thus presents itself to the planner as a sphere of uncertainty that can disrupt development projects. Knowledge production about politics is a method to render it legible and thus, to govern this source of uncertainty by either technocratising it into implementable interventions, or by containing it as a calculable risk. The implications of this framework are that the work of addressing the anti-politics machine is not about politicising development, but of technocratising politics. Furthermore, this task is not a one-shot solution, and does not have any end-date. Rather, it is an iterative process in which development practitioners, and development knowledge producers work together to regulate and moderate technocratic excess.

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1. INTRODUCTION

In his influential work on technopolitics, Tim Mitchell writes:

> *Once the problems Egypt faces are defined as natural rather than political, questions of social inequality and powerlessness disappear into the background … The naturalized image of the River Nile and its inhabitants often introduces a certain construction of history, from which will follow the need for technological rather than political solutions* (Mitchell 1995:134-135).

But what would happen if this were to change, and if Egypt's problems were actually to be defined as political? Following the logic of Mitchell's argument, would that lead to solutions that are political rather than technological? What would happen if the anti-politics machine (Ferguson 1990) were to become more politically conscious, and incorporate a more complete and sophisticated understanding of that realm in its narratives?

Once a radical critique advanced by scholars of a critical persuasion, the idea that development is too technocratic and de-politicised (Wilson 2006) has since become much more widely accepted in the mainstream. The narratives of development failure are by now familiar: complex socio-economic problems are fatally simplified into bland formulaic technicalities; well-intentioned development schemes routinely fail because they are ignorant of the political realities on the ground; experiential indigenous metis is cast aside in favour of western scientific knowledge; the authority of supposedly neutral technical expertise is deployed to defuse vibrant social contestations.

Since the early-1990s, there has been a growing consensus that the causes of development failure lie not in the economic or technical sphere, but in the political. As a result, politics itself has become much more central to the theory and practice of development. Many new non-economic concepts such as governance, social capital, participation, or political economy analysis, have gradually been embraced and integrated into the everyday vocabulary of development around the world. Alongside the changing definition of development beyond growth towards poverty alleviation, this expansion in its remit beyond the economic and into the political represents the most significant transformation in the field since the neoliberal turn.

However, the historic nature of this shift notwithstanding, these early attempts at introducing politics into development did not meaningfully resolve the critique of technocracy. On the contrary, it led to a new round of criticism that the changes introduced were inadequate, and had themselves paradoxically fallen victim to depoliticisation. The good governance agenda in particular, was subject to a sustained critique for being misguided and technocratic. Rather than bringing politics into development, it was found to have taken politics out of governance, thus becoming the problem that it had purported to fix (Leftwich 1994, Cook and Kothari 2001, Harriss 2002, Doornbos 2001).

Politics has, as a result, remained unresolved as a perpetual source of dissatisfaction and critique in development, and this has spurred a constant stream of scholarly criticism and practitioner innovation. By the early 2000's, a new momentum had emerged within the leading

bilateral and multilateral donors to take politics much more seriously. Unlocking the black box of politics became widely seen as the cutting edge in unleashing development effectiveness. Dasandi et al (2016) describe how this has involved an emphasis on the acquisition of deeper contextual political expertise to generate 'politically smart, locally led' programming (Booth and Unsworth 2014). Carothers and Gramont (2013:14) describe the rise of this 'new politics of development agenda', that seeks to provide a more integrated, sophisticated understanding of politics and to infuse it into the way that transformation is conceived and executed:

> ...adopting political methods and goals aimed at making aid more effective is a valuable trend. The movement to renovate development aid by fully taking onboard political thinking and action is crucial to the future of the endeavour […] It is therefore well past time to move past the chronic shortcomings of narrow technocratic approaches.

A number of practice-based innovations, such as 'Thinking and Working Politically', or 'Doing Development Differently' (Booth and Unsworth 2014, Hudson and Leftwich 2014) have emerged to explicitly address and overcome the bashfulness and naîvete of the past in dealing with politics. Many development organisations have introduced political economy analysis as a standarised component of project evaluation (Unsworth 2009, Duncan and Williams 2012, Routley and Hulme 2013, Copestake and Williams 2014, Yanguas and Hulme 2015, Fisher and Marquette 2016). The use of the political settlements framework (Di John and Putzel 2010, Khan 2010, Kelsall 2016) within the UK's erstwhile Department for International Development (DFID) deserves particular mention for the extent to which it signified their commitment to seeking out to a deeper level of situated political knowledge on recipient countries.

Given the unsatisfactory track record of the past, what are the prospects for this agenda to now succeed? As Sam Hickey (2008:349) asks, 'Has politics finally been put back into development?' This paper takes this operationally relevant policy question as the point of departure to engage with a more abstract and fundamental problem that underlies it: what is meant by making development more political, and why is this so elusive in practice?

In brief, the approach here is based on denaturalising these categories to examine how they are constructed in the inner frames of the development planner. In that sphere, the distinction between the technical and the political is manifest as a cognitive divide between the known and the unknown. Politics takes the form of a wide range of disruptive social-contextual uncertainties that sit outside the knowledge base and the cognitive horizons of the technical expert. Knowledge production about politics is a compulsion that arises from the need to mitigate uncertainty by rendering it legible and amenable to programmatic incorporation. As a result, the effect of addressing depoliticisation in development is not that of politicising development, but of technocratising politics.

What this means is that those seeking a straight-forward, robust, or operationally practical answer to the problems of technocracy may find the approach here obscure and frustrating, although there are still compelling reasons to read on. Placing depoliticization within this context connects the operational concerns of development practitioners to a much broader historical current of ideas on the enlightenment project of rationalisation and its critics, on the resilience of the political, and on the critique of scientific expertise. But it nevertheless provides

a conclusion that bears practical significance to the more terrestrial problems of development effectiveness.

2. CONTEXT AND APPROACH

The subject matter of this paper involves the development industry and the intellectual communities that are in orbit to evaluate, problematise, research, and theorise it. The development industry refers primarily what can lazily be described as the 'mainstream' development organisations: aid ministries, government departments, implementing agencies and frontline workers in the diverse array and scale of projects underway across the developing world (Stirrat 2008). These involve not just development aid agencies, but also includes relevant public bodies in developing countries who either have western colonial origins, or who have long been immersed in the ideas and practices of this mainstream.[2]

Within this environment, politics (and thus depoliticization), is used to describe a vast assortment of ideas, processes, and practices. Even within the relatively narrow bounds of development studies, it can refer to entirely unconnected areas of the social, institutional and cultural landscape, from class dynamics and capillary power to mundane forms of capricious misconduct. How does one study such a many-headed hydra? In the political economy of development, politics is that which explains, whereas here, that task is compromised by the fact that it is politics itself, and political economy analysis that is under scrutiny. How is it possible to establish critical distance from a phenomenon that is said to pervade everything, and which self-aware researchers will themselves admit to being immersed in?

The approach to studying depoliticization and addressing these problems in this paper is two-fold. Firstly, depoliticization is identified in terms of the way that the political and the technical are constituted as polar categories in the field of development. Secondly, these terms are not provided with an ex-ante definition, but rather, the purpose is to see how they are constituted and gain meaning in the context of development practices and discourses. In other words, while the political and the technical have well-defined meanings in common usage and in the academic literature, the analytical conceit here is to leave those aside. Instead, they are denaturalised and 'rendered strange' in order that they can be observed from an emic perspective, from within the inner world of the development planner. Their meaning is left to be inferred from their usage within, rather than imposed from above.

Following Bacchi (2012) on Foucault's use of 'problematization', the point of analysis is not to look for the one correct response to an issue but to examine how it is 'questioned, analysed, classified and regulated' at 'specific times and under specific circumstances' (Deacon, 2000: p. 127). The task is not one of excavating and uncovering a hidden politics behind the technical, or even to provide a more rigorous and sharp definition (while recognising that many valuable definitions do exist). It is instead about examining the basis on which knowledge of the field has

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[2] It also does not explicitly deal with the rise of new donors from the global south such as China, although many of the features of Chinese aid such as the emphasis on economic growth, structural transformation, infrastructure, loans, or the principle of political non-interference resemble the status quo ante of Western aid before the 1980s (Mawdsley 2018)

been constructed. How did politics become established as a problem in development?[3] What is this politics thus constructed? What work is the word 'politics' made to do in development narratives? What effects has its problematization had in that universe?

Within those inner narratives of development, depoliticization is observed in terms of three processes, each of which establish a polarity between the technical and the political in distinct ways. Firstly, depoliticization is a process that is consciously undertaken by the development industry for ethical reasons. Development gains its authority by projecting itself as an altruistic and morally responsible vehicle to promote the common good. Politics, in contrast, is cast as the antithesis of this: as a selfish, predatory and divisive force in which narrow and particular interests are locked in competition with one another to secure dominance and privilege. This generates a strong ethical prerogative for development actors to preserve their standing by consciously disengaging and distancing themselves from any association with political actors, ideologies, competition, and discourse.

The best known illustration of this is the World Bank's article IV provision to 'not interfere in the political affairs of any member…Only economic considerations shall be relevant ' (IBRD 2012). As Jasanoff (1990) and Gieryn (1999) write of the science/non-science divide, development practitioners must actively undertake 'boundary work' to preserve their authority and public standing by constructing and preserving the distinction between the technical and the political realm. This might well be a fiction in practice, but it is widely seen as a useful fiction that must be upheld and nurtured.[4]

Secondly there is a very different type of depoliticization that takes place structurally, and without involving agency or conscious intentionality that resembles the workings of Ferguson's (1990) 'anti-politics machine'. In organisational terms, the development industry is composed of Weberian legal-rational bureaucracies and managerial systems. The strength, resilience, and purpose of a development bureaucracy is that it is predictable, de-personalised, procedural, rules-based, and robust, all of which are in explicit contrast to the fluid, idiosyncratic, personalised ebb and flow of the real social world. Development agencies are tasked with the rational and systematic implementation of plans, which Scott (1998) goes on to describe, occurs through the standardisation of complex and fluid realities into bureaucratically recognisable pixels. In Whitty's (2019) ethnography of a development aid agency office, this task is described as 'rendering operational'. Social realities and development problems must be completely decomposed and reordered to fit within a managerial iron cage (Eagleton-Pierce 2020, Joachim and Schneiker 2018), and through its modes of implementation and accountability.

Thirdly, depoliticization also takes place through disciplinary bounds. Development has historically been framed as an economic problem, by economists, with economic concepts, theories, tools, and metrics at hand. Trapped within this introversion for many decades, it has lacked the capacity or vocabulary to see or speak of large parts of the social universe, except in a limited number of economic concepts, in economistic forms of reasoning, or through the reductive logic of economic instrumentality. Democracy, education, or other forms of well-

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[3] See Chhotray (2011) chapter 2 for a discussion of the idea of anti-politics.
[4] There are clear connections here with the Mertonian norm of universalism and disinterestedness in science (Merton 1973) as with the Red Cross's guiding principles of impartiality and neutrality (Forsythe 2005)

being could thus be evaluated and rationalised only in the very narrow sense that they produced efficiency gains and economic growth. Gender equality for long had to be justified on the basis that women were economically productive (Razavi and Miller 1995).

Critics of development who did not speak the language of economics or present their ideas through its grid of intelligibility could not be understood or engaged with. This is not, as is often assumed, a problem that is unique to neoclassical economics, rational choice epistemology, or the neoliberal ascendancy, for it was prevalent and widely written about in the pre-neoliberal decades of the 1960s and 1970s. As this anthropological critique of development in the 1960s notes: 'it is economic policies, theories and models that dominate the policies currently singled out in development studies' (Apthorpe 1970).

The depoliticisation that is widely pathologised in development can thus occur variously through the boundary work that sustains the authority of technical actors, through the bureaucratisation of complexity into technical implementables, and through the disciplinary frames that see and theorise only a limited part of the social world. What these three processes of depoliticization share is the understanding that there exists a social ontology constituted by the polarity between two categories: the political and the technical, (or politics-technics). The relationship between these two resonates and connects closely to a number of familiar dualities that are present across social science literature including the subjective-objective, particular-universal, values-facts, qualitative-quantitative, or interpretivist-positivist. There are literary and scientific references at hand from Prometheus and Frankenstein to Pinocchio and the idea of vitalism that situate this debate within a broader historical and cultural milieu of the enlightenment and its critics from the left and right.

From the right, Carl Schmitt's work on the concept of the political (Schmitt 2008, Sartori 1989, McCormick 1997, Marder 2010) speaks very directly to the politics-technics divide from the tradition of the German 'counter-enlightenment' (Berlin 1980). Politics to Schmitt is not epiphenomenal, but essential. It is an intense, inherently conflictual, and fundamental human experience that liberalism aspires to contain and limit by bureaucratic and technocratic means. In a conclusion that has been drawn on by many (Mouffe 1999), he argues that in this struggle between mechanics and the soul, it is politics that endures, and remains resilient.

A somewhat similar argument on the resilience of the political, but with a different rationale and intellectual current is available in critical development studies. As with Schmitt, this school of thought has a deep scepticism of liberal technocracy, but one that originates not in the tradition of German romanticism, but more in the 20th century critique of positivism, and the critical theory of the Frankfurt school (Marcuse 1955, 1964, 1969; Horkheimer & Adorno 2002). Here, the technical and political are cast not as clashing opposites, but as accomplices. Tim Mitchell (2002) and James Ferguson (1994) thus explain how the technical rendering of development problems in Egypt and Lesotho had deeper political implications. Escobar (1995) describes how the problematisation of poverty and the construction of the third world by the development industry led to a mode of subordination through the kind of expertise and solutions that followed.

Development and its technocratic rendering are not seen as neutral or apolitical, but instead serve as a vehicle to legitimise, or euphemise a hidden political project. The depoliticised language of development discourse thus amounts to a narrative sleight of hand through which a predatory agenda of domination is smuggled in, and made to appear legitimate. The technical is, in that sense, instrumental and reducible to its underlying politics, so that the constructed polarity between them collapses.

The politics-technics duality is thus an enduring idea that is used to advance a number of rival positions on the nature of depolitization in development. The Frankfurt school's intellectual descendants scrutinise the duality, and use it as a vehicle to question the legitimacy of the development industry by exposing its hidden politics and its claims to ethical authority. Schmitt, on the other hand, implies that the essential vitality of the political realm will ultimately confound, undermine, and supersede the technical. His implication is that development interventions can as such never fully succeed, because there will always be a residual and disruptive political factor that cannot be eliminated.

3. THE POLITICS-TECHNICS DIVIDE AS A COGNITIVE GAP
Within the inner frames of reference of the development planner, the politics-technics duality is defined by a cognitive gap. This feature is present in Auguste Comte's benevolent positivism about the systematic application of an ethically motivated science of society to regulate the immanent, destructive dynamics of capitalist expansion (Cowen and Shenton 1996). It is also contained in the relationship between immanent versus planned change, or little-d versus big-D (Hart 2001). However, it has its clearest definition in James Scott's (1998) description of planners who see like a state, and have cognitive limits based on what is visible and legible to them. Their knowledge is always partial based on their positionality at the apex, which fatally limits the design of the ambitious plans that they engineer and impose.

The known world is that part of the social and scientific universe which has been explored, mapped, studied, and lies available in their toolkit. That which is legible and known is 'technical'. That which is invisible to them and hence unknown is 'politics'. That is, to the development planner, politics does not have any adequate fixed definition, but is the label attributed to a large residual category of unknown social phenomena that exist outside the project's technical frame and the development outcome that is being attempted. It is a shadowy *terra incognita* that is not legible, in the sense that it has not been properly understood or theorised, and hence lies beyond the competence of the planner. At times, it finds mention in project documents as 'political risk', although this is actually a misnomer, because risk is calculable (Ewald 1991, Lupton 1999, Dean 1999). Politics instead takes the form of a more profound uncertainty. It dwells in the Rumsfeldian void of the 'unknown unknowns' and can emerge randomly and unpredictably in its form, magnitude, and timing to catastrophically disrupt the outcome of an otherwise well designed development project or policy.

This can be illustrated by examining the way politics was deployed in development narratives in the years before the word politics itself became fetishised. Take, for example, the post-hoc evaluation in 1990 of a 1979 World Bank agricultural project in Madagascar rated as 'highly unsatisfactory':

> *With the benefit of hindsight, it is now clear that the timing of project appraisal (early 1978) was unfortunate since only a few months later, significant political changes […] took place which considerably affected the project set-up. It was quite impossible, at appraisal, to clearly evaluate the political and sociological environment and to foresee the risks which were to occur to the project* (World Bank 1990:4).

Similarly, the analysis of the failure of a public sector reform project in Niger during the 1980s considered how:

> *As it turned out, the PESAP was too ambitious given the Government's capacity to implement reforms, especially under difficult political circumstances. The Bank's previous experience in public enterprise reform (including privatization) was also limited, and for this reason the magnitude of the complexities involved, both technical and political, was not fully appreciated during program preparation.* (World Bank 1992: v)

An academic review of development plan failure in tropical Africa during the 1970s finds that political factors are primarily responsible, and concludes:

> *..A closer scrutiny reveals further that most causes of implementation failure lie outside of the competence of the planners. Neither an improvement in planning procedure nor a more realistic appraisal of implementation machinery holds out much promise for significant improvements in the implementation records* (Shen 1977: 423)

What can be inferred from these texts is that development projects are seen to fail because something called 'politics' occurs. It remains undefined, but by inference, politics amounts to an unanticipated disturbance, located beyond the frame of analysis, reference, or relevance to the project, that interrupts its otherwise well planned execution. It lies beyond the pale of expert knowledge, and is as such irrational, unfathomable and mysterious.

Disturbances to development arising from politics are described fatalistically in much the same way that insurance contracts would describe 'acts of god', and indeed, they are similar to the way Hewitt (1995:113) explains the social construction of natural disasters, 'as problems due to external factors beyond managerial control— natural extremes, impersonal forces of demography, accident and error'.

The source of this categorisation of the cognitive horizon into the technical versus the political has its origin in the distinction between scientific and social knowledge. It is thus particularly acute in projects that are designed and implemented by engineers. But the cognitive gap remains a serious issue even within the social sciences due to its internal disciplinary and epistemological barriers. As noted earlier, the economistic framing of development has historically constrained what planners have seen, diagnosed, and operationalised.

As a result, development policy-makers have to operate with a rudimentary and inadequate knowledge base. Their models of social change are poorly specified and suffer from omitted variable bias. There is consequently a high rate of failure because projects and policies are ill-

designed to engage and cope with the complexity of the rest of the inter-connected social universe.

This is a long-standing problem that is widely described in development studies. As Leftwich (2005:475) explains, development 'needs to be understood essentially and explicitly as a political process, embedded in, and mutually interacting with, a network of socioeconomic relationships'. Michael Cernea, who was famously the first anthropologist recruited to address this issue in the World Bank in the early 1970s, describes this from his insider's perspective:

> *By the econocentric model I have in mind approaches that one-sidedly focus on influencing the economic and financial variables, regarding them as the only ones that matter...It simply wishes away the noneconomic variables from theory, but does not remove them from reality. But we have seen that when the social determinants of development are left out by econocentric mindsets, projects display an unrepressed and not at all funny propensity—they fail.* (Cernea 1995:344)

The 'econocentric model' is a limiting factor, but it's identification by Apthorpe, Leftwich, Cernea, and many others also provides a way forward if knowledge on politics can somehow still be produced and incorporated. In less abstract terms, the path out of this cognitive black hole is what Sam Hickey (2008: 350) calls for in his study on the politics of poverty reduction: 'the links between politics and development need to be understood in ways that are intellectually rigorous and theoretically coherent, and in forms that can be operationalized within, or at least rendered legible to, development practice'.

4. RENDERING POLITICS LEGIBLE

Rendering legible is effectively the work of governing uncertainty by expanding the realm of knowledge into the political unknown. This option had of course for long been limited by the knowledge parameters guided development, and it changed slowly from the 1970s onwards in two directions. Firstly, the disciplinary bounds of economics were steadily extended outwards to theorise the non-economic elements of the social landscape. Between 1950s-80s, the emergence of public choice theory, 'positive' political economy and the new institutional economics provided new explanations for the political and institutional sources of policy dysfunction, and did so in the vocabulary of academic economics. Consequently, these newly explored realms of the social universe became intelligible and influential in those circles, and found sympathy with important actors in the development industry. Ideas such as 'rent-seeking', 'regulatory capture', or 'budget-maximising' developed by James Buchanan, George Stigler, George Niskanen, Gordon Tullock, Anne Kruger, and others provided answers that were deemed rigorous and convincing in that milieu to what had hitherto been seen as irrational, or that had been consigned to the realm of preferences or predispositions.

Similarly, the idea that 'institutions matter' also became more widely accepted during the 1990s following the work of scholars such as Ronald Coase, Douglas North, and Daren Acemoglu. Together, they explained why rational bureaucrats and politicians would subvert purportedly rational policies, and how functional institutions and prudent governance were critical to sustaining economic growth. The influence of public choice theory in particular helps to explain

the conviction behind market liberalisation in the 1980s, which was not just about rolling back the state in order to unleash the market. It was also about restraining the domestic political sphere, and ring-fencing the economy from the perverse incentives that radiated out through the state from powerful rent-seeking interest groups.

Public choice theory has also contributed to the idea that politics, while important to master, and rational in its origins, remains largely separable from the technicalities of economic policy and transformation. The solution it offers is one of inserting the appropriate institutions and mastering the incentive system of power-holders in order to manipulate it for developmental ends. The political field thus assumes the form of an obstacle course that planners need to understand and tactically tiptoe around in order to get development projects past self-interested gate-keepers, vested interests, and power-holders (Fritz, et al 2014). Brendan Whitty's ethnography of a DFID field office describes this attitude: 'political awareness was characterized as a set of practices: a way of interacting with and managing counterparts and partners which takes into account sensitivity to environment and the relations with people' (Whitty 2019:O305).

Secondly, and to a lesser extent, new political knowledge in development was produced by stepping outside the disciplinary bounds of economics altogether to the other social sciences. Examples of this would include the presence of anthropologists and other social scientists in the World Bank, who increased in number from 1 in 1974 to more than 450 in 2004 (Mosse 2011), the incorporation of participatory methods (Chambers 1994), or the influence of the political settlements framework, particularly in the British context. What is important to note about political settlements, is that it has its intellectual genealogy in the classical tradition of political economy, and emerged as an explicit critique of the good governance agenda, the new institutional economics, and the broader Post-Washington Consensus that undergirds it (Khan 2010, Putzel and Di John 2012, Gray 2016, Gray 2019).

The introduction of new political knowledge into development has thus not been a smooth and linear process, but has taken place in the context of the long-standing *methodenstreit* in political economy between formalist and substantivist approaches that have different intellectual origins and world views.[5] However, despite the considerable differences between the two approaches, their role in the dynamics of knowledge production and depoliticisation described here is largely the same. That is, they address politics as an uncertainty that needs to be governed and mitigated by the expansion of the frontier of knowledge, which by definition is the dividing line between the technical and the political. The knowledge thus harvested is available to make development more functional, sophisticated, and less prone to uncertainty. This is a one-way process without a reverse gear, so that the inadequacies of earlier versions of political knowledge and forms of intervention can only be addressed through more research and through better engineered forms of intervention.

5. DISENCHANTMENT AND THE REVERSE MIDAS TOUCH

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[5] See in particular Adrian Leftwich's (1995, 2005) critique of good governance, and of the economistic understanding of the social world.

This search to reduce uncertainty by researching and providing rational explanations for politics is what Max Weber (1946 [1919]) might describe as the disenchantment of the traditional world of development. Nature was demystified through the expansion of knowledge, reason and rationalisation under the enlightenment. In development, this means turning politics into calculable and operationally digestible units of technical knowledge, the same task that science has done to nature. As James Scott observes:

> *A recurrent theme of Western philosophy and science, including social science, has been the attempt to reformulate systems of knowledge in order to bracket uncertainty and thereby permit the kind of logical deductive rigor possessed by Euclidean geometry. In the natural sciences, the results have been revolutionary. Where philosophy and the human sciences are concerned, the efforts have been just as persistent but the results far more ambiguous* (Scott 1998: 321).

Science conquered that previously given to chance and fate, making the natural world calculable, and predictable, and there are two distinct ways in which this is theorised. In Horkheimer & Adorno's (2002:6) account, disenchantment is about domination: the natural world is studied that it might be conquered, and the scientist 'stands in the same relationship to things as the dictator to human beings. He knows them to the extent that he can manipulate them.' In the same way, the naive world of technocratic development has gradually sought to make politics legible in order to dominate and manipulate it. And herein lies the purpose served by development studies scholarship, a realm in which where even after the critique of positivism, 'everyone's a Captain Kirk with orders to identify, to clarify, and classify'.[6] Political economy analysis, area studies expertise, and the deeper excavations of the political settlements framework are all tasked with the same work: of identifying and generating new knowledge to shift the cognitive margin outwards.

This work does not require knowledge producers to be explicitly 'constructive' or 'policy-relevant'. There is also value in those who are critical and even dismissive of the development enterprise. It bears mention, for example, that a significant part of James Ferguson's (1990) critique of the ideological and political effects of the Thaba-Tseka project is about identifying quite basic problems of inadequate research and a weak understanding of rural livelihoods in Lesotho. By pointing it out, Ferguson contributed to the identification of knowledge gaps as a problem, and as the locus of future intervention.

What is different between the natural and social science projects of knowledge reformulation is that the latter famously has the ability to scrutinise itself by being more intellectually self-aware and reflexive. This is not, however, always borne out in practice. Deconstructing technical expertise and laying bare its hidden politics does not bring the authority of experts to an end at all, because of the awkward fact that it requires experts to deconstruct expertise. It involves the creation of new forms of technical knowledge by specialists in discourse and politics, who must mimic and enact the same formal rituals of scientific research: methodological rigour, clinical dissection, and boundary work.

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[6] Credit: 99 Red Balloons, Kevin McAlea, Uwe Fahrenkrog-Petersen, Nena.

It leads to questions that affect the entire premise of this academic project. If the political critique of technical expertise is to be accepted at face value, it implies that there is a disciplinary hierarchy such that the political expertise required of such a task is somehow different and more worthy, so that it stands above the scientific/technical expertise that it deigns to judge. Or else, one is left to conclude from this manifest lack of scholarly self-awareness that all expertise - and thus the basis of the critique itself - is compromised.

The new political information rendered legible by research in this process has two possible uses in the governance of uncertainty. It can either be technocratised into implementable interventions, or deployed to contain uncertainty and convert it into a more calculable risk. In either case, politics revealed is by definition no longer part of politics. The expansion of the cognitive frontier has reclassified terrain from the unknown to the known: from politics to the technical. As Tania Li (2007:7) describes, 'Questions that are rendered technical are simultaneously rendered nonpolitical'. Many putatively political factors, such as social capital, or civil society were once outside the realm of development policy, relevance, or knowledge, and were absent from development documents. Their subsequent discovery and incorporation into development thinking was viewed as the cutting edge, in much the same way that certain kinds of politically sensitive development or political economy analysis have since become celebrated for having finally conquered the anti-politics machine.

But no more. The process of being researched, analysed, and technically incorporated extracts these ostensibly political features from the murky world of ignorance and uncertainty. Rendering politics visible to development and operationalising it is thus paradoxically also a process of depoliticising and technocratising it. Fisher and Marquette (2016) make the observation that recent innovations in political knowledge such as PEA analysis and the idea of 'ownership' have tended towards the technical. Merry (2011:S88) similarly explains this transformation well in the way that human rights indicators are constructed:

> the expansion of the use of indicators in global governance means that political struggles over what human rights or corporate social responsibility means and what constitutes compliance are submerged by technical questions of measurement, criteria, and data accessibility. Political debates about compliance shift to arguments about how to form an indicator, what should be measured, and what each measurement should represent.

There is, in other words, no need to invoke the spectre of malign intent, predatory ambition, or the impulse to dominate here. As James Ferguson (1990) and Tania Li (2006) have described, these processes are automated within the machine. Depoliticisation is inherent in the mechanics of producing knowledge to mitigate uncertainty. It means that there is a certain catch-22 in the relationship between the political and technical. Politics remains this mystical presence in development that is perpetually researched, but which, once found, is frustratingly no longer political. For example, the idea of participatory development was once a radical idea that would, it was hoped, infuse politics into development and transform it. It created knowledge through searching out the ideas and views of those who had hitherto been voiceless and whose knowledge had been de-valued (Chambers 1994). Indeed, it remains a very significant evolution in development thinking. But by the 1990s, participation had become so well incorporated that it was criticised for being formulaic, depoliticised, and even tyrannical

(Bastian and Bastian 1996, Cleaver 1999, Kapoor 2002, Kothari 2001, Mosse 1994, Chhotray 2004).

The circular pattern of this process is one in which technocratic failure and the impulse to mitigate uncertainty leads to political research, the unveiling of new political innovations, technical incorporation, and depoliticisation. In the reproduction of this sequence of events, there perpetually remains an unknown and problematic 'politics' out there, which once found, becomes victim to the reverse midas touch of the development industry. The act of researching and uncovering politics expands the frontier of technical knowledge, but it is a Sisyphian task. The realm of the unknown is potentially endless. Development scholars perpetually research politics and find it, but keep having to repeat this process. As Schmitt might note, the technical can never fully conquer the political. There remains an elusive and confounding political wilderness, perpetually undiscovered out there.

6. PESSIMISM OF THE INTELLECT

With this framework in mind, how would one answer the question posed earlier: will the new politics of development agenda succeed in its aims? One can start to answer this through extrapolating Tim Mitchell's problematic on the technical framing of development problems. That is, what would happen if the traditional framing of Egypt's problems were to change, and if they were to be described more politically rather than technically? What would happen if the development industry were to become more politically conscious?

The answer provided here would start with the proposition that if politics is not taken as a fixed real world essence, but merely as the designated name for a range of operational uncertainties, it gives rise to a new set of insights. Describing Egypt's problems as political would thus lead to the production of new and improved political knowledge, but such knowledge would itself become rendered technical within the iron cage, and would generate interventions that would come to be characterised as formulaic and depoliticised. In other words, identifying politics as a problem and incorporating it into development is not going to result in a satisfying and simple solution in itself, but will likely lead to a re-generation of the original problem and complaint. The work of 'putting politics back into development' is thus not about politicising development, but rather, about technocratising politics.

The logical steps in the argument that lead to this conclusion begin with the fundamental tension in the development landscape between the technical and the political. In the cognitive map of technocratic development, this distinction is manifest in terms of a divide between the known versus the unknown world. Politics is a benighted and unexplored realm of ignorance that is relevant only insofar as it is a source of uncertainty that disrupts what are otherwise carefully planned technical projects. The point here is not the common complaint that development actors do not know enough of politics, but rather the reverse: that which is unknown to development is categorised as politics. Politics ipso facto has become the word to signify that part of the contextual social universe which has not been adequately technically abstracted, and that lurks in the background as a source of danger. The need to mitigate and regulate this dangerous uncertainty means that new, hitherto unknown spaces in the social terrain are constantly being explored, mapped, and brought under control.

The way in which this goes on to unfold can be made in reference to the way Arturo Escobar (1995: 24) describes how the discursive construction of poverty generated its own reality:

> *poverty became an organizing concept and the object of a new problematization. As in the case of any problematization (Foucault 1986), that of poverty brought into existence new discourses and practices that shaped the reality to which they referred. That the essential trait of the Third World was its poverty and that the solution was economic growth and development became self-evident, necessary, and universal truths.*

If the discourse of depoliticisation in development is problematised as Escobar sees poverty, it takes on a different logic that can provide an answer to Mitchell. As Tania Li (2007: 7) notes, 'The identification of a problem is intimately linked to the availability of a solution'. That is, the academic and practitioner consensus that identifies politics and technocratic expertise as a chronic source of development failure should not be seen as merely descriptive, but also generative. It creates the policy problem that it identifies (Gusfield 1984).

Politics is thus framed as a problem arising from inadequate social knowledge. It is the diagnosis attributed to a range of 'wicked' social issues that negatively affect development. Critical social science scholars identify depoliticization, formulaic interventions, and a lack of political sensitivity as chronic problems that lead to development failure. These in turn generate solutions designed to improve project design and mitigate political uncertainty through expanding the cognitive frontier with research. The act of researching and rendering politics legible transforms it, and makes it amenable to programmatic incorporation.[7] Doing so also fatally renders it technical.

Thus, in the landscape of development, politics remains this mythical Loch Ness Monster or Tibetan Yeti that is perpetually talked of in its absence, and that is much sought after. But as with humour or frogs, the process of dissecting and explaining it is tantamount to killing it. Extending the frontier of knowledge reveals new insights, but this task never seems to end. There is instead an iterative cycle in which development failure, the identification of technocracy as a problem, knowledge production, and depoliticization feed and reproduce one another.

Borrowing the same Foucauldian analytical device that they draw on, the problems that Mitchell or Ferguson narrate can be temporally extrapolated out in different light. It would suggest that while representing a significant and thorough critique of the positivist foundations of development, the deconstruction of development discourse does not seem to have escaped its enveloping grasp, but may have been co-opted by it. The critical academic scrutiny of development to expose its hidden politics has thus not disrupted or destabilised its target at all, but has served to improve, nourish, sustain, enhance, and reproduce it. What Horkheimer & Adorno (2002:3) observe darkly of the broader enlightenment project can thus be applied to development: 'Any intellectual resistance it encounters merely increases its strength.'

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[7] This is necessarily a simplification. There is a category of political knowledge rendered legible which is not, or cannot be operationalised, but which is nevertheless used to govern uncertainty. It does so by transforming 'unknown unknowns' to 'known unknowns', so that it is contained within the parameters of a calculable risk.

What are the implications of this framework and its conclusions?

Are there finite limits to these iterations of politicization and depoliticization described above? Is there some point at which it will exhaust itself, in the sense that all that is there to be known of politics will be 'finally' understood, and be put 'back' into development? Is it possible to achieve such a state of finality, at which point the anti-politics machine can be dismantled, so that practitioners can then move on to address the real work of development?

The larger epistemological question that this raises is about whether knowledge itself is finite, or whether the landscape of the unknown stretches on and keeps expanding. The idea that humanity has reached the bounds of all possible knowledge and that science has been perfected has been expressed at various points since the 19th century (Hawking 1981), but it remains vigorously contested. As Rescher (2003: 257-274) explains, the idea of a bounded and complete science is implausible, because it would need to have the capacity to perfectly explain everything that has happened, predict everything that will happen, and engineer anything that can be. It would also have to be complete in the sense that there could be no doubt that any further new improvement of knowledge could be possible in the future. The implication one is left with is that knowledge is infinite. If the unknown is boundless, then for development practitioners, it might also mean that politics could be an infinite sea of darkness that can never be fully overcome. The task of rendering it legible would be perpetually frustrating and never reach an end point.

A corollary to this is the idea that while knowledge itself may be infinite, the real challenge is a more modest one, of knowability. The extent to which knowledge can be acquired is limited by the instruments available, by human cognitive capacity, and by the diminishing returns to new research (Fodor 1983, McGinn 1993, Chomsky 2000). After a point, the incremental value of new research on politics may just be too complex, arcane, or expensive to pursue. Instead of iterating to infinity, the process could thus stop at an optimal equilibrium. Rather than perfection, one could then stop at a 'good enough' politics, where the cost of uncovering new knowledge begins to exceed the possible gains of doing so. The participatory rural appraisal approach (PRA) was designed with this problem in mind, to transcend the limits of what was knowable to outside experts by drawing on rural communities to design and generate their own knowledge (Chambers 1994, Agrawal 1995, Briggs 2005). But there are limits even here: as David Mosse (1994) describes, there are certain kinds of metis knowledge which remain resistant even to a PRA. This is either because they are coded in particularly impenetrable ways, or paradoxically, given the explicit purpose of the PRA, because they are from the voiceless, disempowered and marginalised. This implies not just that politics prevails through these inscrutable forms of knowledge that resist capture, but that the contours of the politics-technics divide will repeatedly come to resemble the fault-lines of existing forms of structural exclusion and inequality.

The idea of 'finally' putting politics back into development is thus beset by a pessimism of the intellect. But what if the idea of such an end-point was always a chimera, so that politicizing development needs to be seen as a process, rather than as an event? Perhaps it is important to just accept the reality that development will always be technical because of ethical, institutional,

and cognitive limits. The problem may not be one of dismantling the anti-politics machine as such, because there are good reasons for development actors to maintain ethical standards, manage projects professionally, and use relevant technical knowledge. Instead, perhaps the need is to create mechanisms to constantly moderate, regulate and correct technocracy rather than to end it. The two can, and should, thus co-exist in a productive tension. The work of identifying depoliticization as a challenge, and promoting political sensibility is necessary, but it is not a one-shot solution. It needs to be constantly reproduced and sustained. In this way of thinking, the Sisyphyian nature of the process as described above would not imply failure and futility. Bringing politics into development is not a task that will ever have a clean project end-date. But such an optimism of the will may still be necessary as an ideal: as a useful motivational myth that is required to enthuse its foot-soldiers to keep working at the treadmill. That treadmill of re-politicizing development generates an ongoing awareness and a sensibility of the problems of technocracy and of the finite limits of knowability.

The anti-politics machine may never be dismantled, but the rhetoric of needing to do so has become an important part of an elaborate process by which it is countered, and by which mechanisms to regulate and moderate technocratic excess is created and sustained.

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