

Responses

The Ignorant Donor: A Radical Reimagination of International Aid, Development, and Education

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The logic behind international aid to development has typically centered on economics. Notwithstanding the variation in focus – from macroeconomic monetary and trade policies, to economic wealth programs aimed at creating jobs, to supply- and demand-side reforms – the central discourse on international aid has been dominated by a political economist’s viewpoint. Steven Klees’ article, “Aid, Development, and Education” continues to use an economic perspective by challenging some of the neoliberal economic assumptions made within the development industry since the 1970s.² He offers a refreshing progressive alternative to the dominant neoliberal agenda and its institutions. His initial question – has such aid helped? – has a clear answer in all of the literature he reviews: no, aid has not been as effective as it could have been. But his call for a “new architecture” of international development derives from “old” foundations, reinforcing the established pillars of the economic development continuum – neoliberal, liberal, and progressive. Will a progressive development architecture produce a different outcome than that of (neo)liberalism without rebuilding the philosophical foundations of international aid? Is a reimagination of international aid along radically new philosophical lines possible? If so, what would it look like?

As the development industry is becoming increasingly institutionalized as a science, business, and fashion – after all, anyone (from Western academics to Starbucks customers to celebrities) can now become development “experts” – we would like to challenge the very foundation on which the contemporary development architecture rests. Turning to an 18th-century French teacher named Joseph Jacotot, who attempted (albeit unsuccessfully) to reconceptualize education as an “intellectual emancipation” by implicating teacher expertise in perpetuating inequality, we ponder the possibility of a radical reimagination of international aid along similar lines. Instead of reinforcing the edifice of Western development expertise (seeking better “best practices,” identifying more efficient development methods, or mobilizing additional resources for international aid), perhaps what we really need is an “ignorant donor” – a donor who enters the development scene without the baggage of international aid politics and the concerns of economic progress; who assumes an equality of intelligence in all stakeholders; and who sees empowerment, participation, and education as the ends in the process of international (and national) aid.

On Expertise and Ignorance in International Development

At the end of the 18th century during the prehistory of mass schooling, Jacotot discovered a style of teaching based on emancipation called panecastic.³ In *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*, Rancière (1991) recounts the story of Jacotot, who came to the realization that explication stultifies education by curtailing the independent learning students are able to accomplish on their own. Knowing no Flemish, Jacotot realized that he could successfully teach Flemish students who did not know any

French through the use of a translated book:

To prevent stultification there must be something between the master and the student. The same thing which links them must separate them. Jacotot posited the book as that in-between thing. The book is that material thing, foreign to both the master and the student, where they can verify what the student has seen, what he has told about it, what he thinks of what he has told. (Rancière, 2004, p. 7)

Purposefully unaware of teaching methods and pedagogy, an ignorant schoolmaster could “teach” anything to anybody by encouraging students to see, to tell, and to verify: “[The teacher] had only given [the students] the order to pass through a forest whose openings and clearings he himself had not discovered. Necessity had constrained him to leave his intelligence entirely out of the picture” (Rancière, 1991, p. 9). Instead of worshipping an intellectual hierarchy institutionalized in mass schooling, Jacotot proposed a method of intellectual emancipation based on the principle that all humans have equal intelligence, can instruct themselves, and everything is in everything.⁴ Universal teaching shattered the “pedagogical myth” claiming that “there is an inferior intelligence and a superior one” where the “superior intelligence knows things by reason, proceeds by method, from the simple to the complex, from the part to the whole” (Rancière, 1991, p. 7). Viewing education as the act of emancipation, Jacotot believed the equality of intelligence was the only starting point for any educational experience. The power of education was therefore not in his ability to control the distance between student and teacher’s knowledge but rather in a teacher’s ignorance of his own intelligence during the very act of teaching.

While the lessons of Jacotot received a brief flurry of attention at the end of the 18th century, they quickly fell into oblivion as education became institutionalized in the form of modern mass schooling (Ross, 1991). Mass schooling became the antithesis of Jacotot’s revolutionary ideas as today’s educational rhetoric attests with its relentless insistence on standards (for “best practice”), achievement (of minimum intelligence), and accountability (for procedural equality, among other things). Built around the 19th century myth of “progress,” educational institutions have forcefully displaced the notion of equality of intelligence while maintaining “old intellectual hierarchies” (Rancière, 1991, p. 109) through the division of the world into the knowing and the ignorant, the enlightened and the uninformed, the developed and the developing. These “partitions of the sensible” are “allegories of inequality” (Rancière, 2004, p. 6) whereby mass schooling reinscribes an endless dependency of learners on “expert” knowledge and perpetuates the gap between the knowledgeable and the unintelligent.

The presupposition of the inequality of intelligence has penetrated not only modern mass schooling but also international development efforts. Notwithstanding the different approaches (whether neoliberal, liberal, or progressive), the development industry continues to place people, organizations, and countries with power at a (perceived) higher intellectual position than those on the receiving end. More importantly, the mechanisms of power institutionalizing the inequality of intelligence in international development are becoming increasingly refined, polished, and normalized. As Escobar (1998) explains, “the forms of power that have appeared act not so much by repression as by normalization; not by ignorance but by controlled knowledge; not by humanitarian concern but by the bureaucratization of social action” (p. 92). In this context, equality will never be possible: “Never will the student catch up with the master, nor the people with its enlightened elite; but the hope of getting there makes them advance along the good road...” (Rancière, 1991, p. 120). In the context of international development, never will the “developing” nations catch up with the “developed,” the Rest with the West. It is this

foundational assumption of today's international development framework – the presupposition of the inequality of intelligence – that needs to be dismantled before making any attempt at building “a new architecture” of international development and aid.

New Architecture, Old Foundation

The development continuum outlined by Klees provides useful insights into the differences and similarities between the dominant paradigms of international aid. On one end of the continuum, development experts see market solutions as more effective than government interventions, as in Dichter, Easterly, and Moyo's neoliberal reconceptualizations of aid. In the middle are liberal (with progressive tendencies) experts like Ellerman, Riddell, and Sachs who call for increasing the scope and improving the effectiveness of aid delivery to those in need; who recognize the complexity and lopsidedness of donor-donee relationships; and who advocate for a human rights approach to aid. On the other end of the continuum, Klees proposes a broadly defined approach focused primarily on “equity before growth” – the 1970s idea proposing a global redistribution of wealth towards the needs of the disadvantaged. Equity before growth, combined with an increase in total Official Development Assistance (comparable in size to the Marshall plan) and the elimination of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, are Klees' broad outlines for a new paradigm. Based on a “participatory process” of agreed upon priorities (e.g., impact the poor, emphasize gender, go to scale, and consider the environment), Klees' progressive paradigm of international development would not require more research but more action to “make the 21st century the first one that is just and humane.”

Klees' argument for a progressive paradigm of development assistance appears to reflect radical ideas; After all, the very notion of redistributing wealth would make most conservatives in the US cringe. Citing Joel Samoff (2009), Klees (2010) agrees that the aid system “is in fact working very well. Its essential role is not to achieve publicly stated objectives but rather to maintain a global political economy of inequality” (p. 16). Inequality is a result of neoliberal ideas – not progressive ideas – the logic goes. But how would inequality *not* be present in a progressive paradigm? Klees does not – and probably cannot – provide an answer, but rather points out the liberal-progressive's emphasis on a human rights framework and the need for a critical pedagogy perspective in education reform. While the contributions of critical pedagogy are undeniable (most importantly, it enriched education policy and practice by introducing such powerful concepts as ideology, hidden curriculum, and official knowledge), it has not solved the problem of inequality. Similar to conservative efforts of education reform, critical pedagogy continues to see inequality as “a taken-for-granted, even obvious state of affairs to be confronted by the right mixtures of policies and praxis” (Friedrich, Jaastad & Popkewitz, 2010, p. 573).⁵ Ironically, it is this belief in the human ability to manage inequality that creates such stark similarities between the neoliberal, liberal, and progressive paradigms.

What remains unchallenged (and what closely connects the neoliberal, liberal, and progressive paradigms) is the foundational belief in “progress,” an unrelenting assumption that international development is linear, based on rationality, and progressing towards a “better” world for all. Klees himself confirms these similarities: “these paradigms are more continuous and overlapping than mutually exclusive” (p. 10). Indeed, neoliberals, liberals, and progressives may disagree on what is the “right” way or method towards a better future, but all agree about the overall vision. For example, some argue for a radical reduction or complete elimination of international aid (see Dichter, Easterly, Moyo), while others insist on a radical expansion of aid (see Klees, Riddell). Some may prescribe supply-side reforms (more schools, teachers, and materials), while others focus on the demand-side reforms (more conditional cash transfers, vouchers, and stipends). Yet, they all

speak from the shared conceptual foundation of Western modernity. With academic degrees in economics or development studies, these are world-renowned experts who have studied and worked in the development industry. They therefore “know” the remedies – almost a perverse form of human alchemy – necessary for societies to progress towards the archetypal Developed World. They can even measure (although may disagree over methodology) where countries are on this linear path too.

To disrupt the linearity of modernity’s development paradigms and to demystify their “charismatic power of attraction” (Peet & Hartwick, 2009, p. 1), it is important to carefully examine some of the shared assumptions made by international “experts” across the development continuum described by Klees. For the purpose of this short response, we will focus on two assumptions that seem to most forcefully entrench inequality in contemporary development discourse and practice. These are (1) the logic of rescue that guides most development efforts and (2) the focus on education, empowerment, and participation as the means (not the ends) of international development initiatives aimed at achieving equality. Combined, these underlying assumptions not only maintain the gap between those in power and those in need, but also postpone equality indefinitely.

The logic of rescue

The logic of rescue is perhaps the most striking manifestation of the gap between the knowledgeable and the unintelligent, the presupposition made by Jacotot’s “stultifying master”: “the master presupposes that what the student learns is that same thing as what he teaches him” (Rancière, 2004, p. 7). The teacher holds knowledge students have yet to learn, and only at the correct time will the stultifying master explicate this knowledge to the unintelligent. This knowledge is transmitted homogeneously, without variation. But as students progress by learning the master’s knowledge, it becomes apparent that the student will never know everything the master does. The master controls knowledge and has the power to distribute it at will. International aid acts in a similar fashion. The gap between those who are “helping” and those who are “helped” is no different than the stultifying master and his students: helpers (development experts, development agencies, developed countries, and ordinary citizens) presuppose that (1) help is actually needed; (2) their approach is correct for the situation; (3) the people receiving help cannot help themselves; and (4) their help (if followed directly) will result in a better outcome. Inherent within this logic of rescue are clear spatial demarcations and distances between “good” knowledge, “bad” knowledge, and “no” knowledge. Helpers control the “good” knowledge and see it as their responsibility to pass it on to the perceived unintelligent.

Although the division between those giving and receiving help is clear, development agencies nevertheless speak of their efforts as working towards equality. The logic of rescue is thus employed to close the gap between the knowledgeable and the unintelligent in hopes of achieving universal equality. Yet, the very suppression of this gap creates a false sense of equality (Rancière’s notion of “the good road”), and only perpetuates the foundational assumption of inequality of intelligence. Klees’ notion of “compensatory legitimation” by “good cops” who come up with solutions to inequality and “bad cops” who question the legitimacy of the world order is another way of making the same point. Education for All (EFA) and the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), for example, are ways of including everyone in the utopia of equality. It is thought that the distance between the knowledgeable and the unintelligent is suppressed within this paradigm. By using notions similar to Popkewitz’s (2008) abjection, it becomes clear that speaking of inclusion by referencing only those who are excluded reinforces the inequality that the various international (and national) campaigns for equality try to remedy. In other words, the very attempt to suppress

the distance between the knowledgeable and the unintelligent in the name of equality perpetuates inequality.

With the logic of rescue penetrating all layers of society (including development agencies, governments, and now ordinary citizens), the notion of “help” has become increasingly individualized. Everyone is expected to “help” in one way or another – we must buy product (RED)TM, we must donate to Haiti via cell phone, we must make the world “a better place.” From altruistic help to obligated help to chic help – helping has taken on multiple forms, becoming attractive to an increasingly large audience of potential helpers. In a way, such massification of “help” has opened new opportunities for anyone (irrespective of geographic location, socioeconomic background, or political orientation) to become involved in the act of “helping,” thus strengthening the gap between the “helpers” and those in need through a collective action of rescue. As (RED)TM proclaims, “Buy (RED)TM, save lives. It is as simple as that.” In other words, anyone can now “help” save a person’s life while shopping at GAP or buying a Starbucks coffee. We are also assured that small acts of “help” are valued. We are not expected to save the whole world (at least not right away); we can begin by saving “one child at a time,” “one heart at a time,” “one school at a time,” or “one village at a time” – all by buying one coffee at a time. By spinning the act of help as manageable and international aid as “young, chic, and possible” (Richey & Ponte, 2008, p. 711), such an unprecedented massification of “help” further cements the concept of inequality – the very gap between those who know and those who do not – as the foundational assumption of the existing development policies and practices.

The means/ends of development

The contemporary development paradigm sees education, participation, and empowerment as means to an end, be it the elimination of poverty, the growth of an economy, or the attainment of peace. From this perspective, education becomes a tool that, if used correctly, should lead to some desired (and predetermined) outcome – education for peace (see UNICEF, 1999), education for democracy (see the US Congress, 2001), education to end poverty (see MDG goal 2), or education to fight terrorism (see Mortenson & Relin, 2008). This conceptualization is problematic for two reasons. First, it reduces the role of education to a very technical process, which can be easily controlled and managed for “better” outcomes. It assumes that equality could be achieved given the right combination of education policies and practices. As Rancière (1999) warns, however, this logic can only lead to one outcome: “the integral pedagogization of society – the general infantilization of the individuals that make it up” (p. 133). By extension, the failure to achieve equality is blamed on the very act (and system) of education itself. Education therefore becomes a scapegoat when the ultimate end – achieving equality – is not met.

Second, and more importantly, the development paradigm views equality as a goal, an end to “development.” Within this conceptualization it becomes clear that the foundational assumption of the contemporary development paradigm does not center on equality at all. Equality, rather, is something we all must work towards, must achieve through the right combination of policies and practices. With a philosophical starting point of inequality (which is shared by neoliberal, liberal, and progressive development paradigms alike), it is not surprising that inequality continues to persist. In other words, setting equality as a goal denies people the ability to assume an equality of intelligence and practice equality on a daily basis. Ultimately, what is done in the name of equality results in the reproduction of social dependencies and intellectual hierarchies (Biesta,

2010, p. 57). As Rancière (2004) explains:

Equality is not a goal that governments and societies could succeed in reaching. To pose equality as a goal is to hand it over to the pedagogues of progress, who widen endlessly the distance they promise that they will abolish. Equality is a presupposition, an initial axiom – or it is nothing. (p. 223)

By narrowly viewing education as a means to achieve other goals, we thus fail to perceive it as a value by itself. But what if “participation,” “education,” and “empowerment” became the ends of the development process? And what if equality were viewed as the starting point (not the finish line) of any educational reform? What an individual will do with education and freedom is completely up to her. With these ends, a new starting point emerges similar to Jacotot’s: the belief in the equality of intelligence in all people. Yet nowhere in the contemporary development policy circles is the notion of equality of intelligence recognized, supported, or recommended, let alone funded. What matters, therefore, “is not *that* we are committed to equality, democracy, and emancipation, but *how* we are committed to these concepts and *how* we express and articulate this commitment” (Biesta, 2010, p. 57). Equality, in other words, is practiced – not achieved.

Conclusion

The three dominant development paradigms (neoliberal, liberal, and progressive) outlined by Klees support the foundational assumption of one group of people knowing more than another. This assumption of inequality is no different than what Jacotot saw burgeoning in mass schooling in the 18th century: the very attempts for equality in education were – and continue to be – rooted in profound ideologies of inequality. Instead of building “a new architecture” on the old foundation of Western modernity, perhaps it is time to search for new philosophical starting points to help us think about international development, aid, and education. It is not our job in this conclusion to create a new foundation, but rather to begin pondering the possibility of placing an equality of intelligence as the central assumption within international development. By escaping the logic of rescue and flipping the means and the ends of development, we can begin to imagine new ways of conceptualizing aid.

A paradigm based on the concept of equality of intelligence allows us to reimagine the very notion of equality. As Jacotot realized in his 18th-century classroom, “equality is not given, nor is it claimed; it is practiced, it is verified” (Rancière, 1991, p. 137). The three dominant development paradigms see international development practitioners (governments, NGOs, international organizations, and, increasingly, ordinary citizens) giving equality – the very epitome of inequality because of the power relations inherent in the idea of “giving.” The notion of “handing out education” to “one child at a time” becomes anachronism in this new paradigm. To work towards equality, the stultifying donors of the present will have to learn to be ignorant.

The ignorant donor will ignore the gap between the presupposed intelligence of the poor and that of the rich and let the poor and vulnerable “pass through a forest whose openings and clearings he himself had not discovered,” for the ignorant donor is not poor or vulnerable. The method of passing through this forest and what is actually learned in the process of passing will not be of concern to the ignorant donor either. Why fear that development may become a “chaotic, strictly locally determined phenomenon” (Klees, 2010, p. 21)? Why not respect the decisions made locally and reposition responsibility for re-envisioning one’s future? What if the end is simply creating the circumstances for a “child in need” to pass, no matter what happens afterwards? Assuming an equality of intelligence as a starting point of international development would thus require

the donor of yore to relinquish control of the development industry's stultifying logic and instead practice equality, embracing the unpredictable, uncertain, and diverse outcomes inevitable in the process.

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Endnotes

1. Both authors organized the CIES Northeast Regional Conference held at Lehigh University in October 2009 where Steven Klees first delivered the paper under examination in this special issue of CICE.
2. We will limit our response to Klees' timeline, development aid since the late 1970s, or more broadly defined as the Ronald Reagan-Margaret Thatcher era; however, the points made within this paper can extend to the earlier period of post-World War II reconstruction.
3. Panecastic stems from the French word panécastique, meaning "everything in each."
4. Panecasticism, or universal teaching, moved towards the empowerment of people through their ability to take knowledge and practice equality – not receive them by philosopher-kings who explicated in front of classrooms. The central question for universal teaching was "what do you think about it?" Students therefore were given the opportunity to see, compare, reflect, imitate, try, and correct – by themselves.
5. For a more elaborate critique of the relationship between equality/inequality and critical pedagogy, see Friedrich, Jaastad, and Popkewitz (2010) and Biesta (2010).

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