

Development as Freedom ? Conversations with David Webster and Amartya Sen

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It is a great privilege to pay tribute this evening to our colleague, valued teacher and friend, David Webster

His assassination twenty years ago on 1st May 1989 by the apartheid policeman Ferdi Barnard has not silenced him. I would like this evening to bring back his voice . I want to do this by engaging in a conversation with David and the leading international scholar in development, Amartya Sen. I want to share with you some of the ideas David developed as a scholar. This is in no way a comprehensive account of his scholarly work. I am going to take two articles ; one on migrant labour and another a critique of what he called popular anthropology. These ideas, I believe, shaped the activities that were to make him an icon of the anti-apartheid struggle .

David was fortunate to join the staff of Wits in the early seventies as a new generation of social scientists began to develop a radical critique of the very core of the apartheid system , the exploitation of black labour. Although David's PHD had been on the classical anthropological topic of kinship his field work in the late sixties and early seventies had taken him to southern Mozambique where he had been exposed to the effects of a century of migrant labour

One of the outcomes of this radical moment at Wits was the creation of an inter-disciplinary development studies programme strongly influenced by neo-Marxist dependency and world systems theory. Re-reading David's writings in preparation for this

lecture I was struck by the similarity between that moment in the seventies and the current global economic crisis .

The seventies was a moment when the hegemony of classical liberalism was being challenged in the social sciences at Wits. Capital , and the capitalism system, was under attack because it was seen as being in bed with apartheid. David was very much part of that moment as he wrestled with how to reconcile the notion of a free market with the forced proletarianisation and underdevelopment of the peasants of southern Mozambique. Similarly today , in the wake of the current economic crisis , the hegemony of neo-liberalism is being challenged by post-Keynesians arguing for nationalization of the banks to stimulate demand and Marxists exploring alternatives to neo-liberal capitalism .

Although the development discourse has changed since the seventies , many of the proponents of contemporary globalisation reproduce similar arguments to the market fundamentalism of the sixties . The theorists of global capital hold a similar teleological notion of market led growth culminating in a society approximating the current high consumption patterns of middle class America. Nobel laureate Amartya Sen is far removed from orthodox neo-classical analysis as he adopts human well being rather than mere growth as the goal of development . However, as Richard Sandbrook argues, Sen's approach to development is grounded in **pragmatic neo-liberalism**. His message is clear: 'people in developing countries should adopt free markets, strictly delimit the role of the state, promote liberal –democratic institutions , ensure the provision of basic education and health care, and welcome open discussion of issues'. (Sandbrook; 2000, 1071)

How would David have responded to Sen's eloquent and highly acclaimed notion of **development as the expansion of freedom**?

I want to divide this lecture into three parts :

- Firstly, I want to deal with David's early scholarly work
- Then I want give a critical introduction to Amartya Sen
- I will conclude with some comments on David's legacy

Let me begin by focusing on David Webster's early work

Doing field work in the late sixties and early seventies on the traditional anthropological topic of kinship amongst the Chopi people of Southern Mozambique, David Webster was surprised to discover that 42% of the able-bodied young men were absent for long periods of time working on the South African gold mines. Indeed men had been migrating from Southern Mozambique to the South African diamond and gold mines since the late nineteenth century. Popular wisdom at the time attributed this to what David contemptuously referred to as the 'bright lights' theory ; the idea that these men chose voluntarily to migrate because they were attracted to life in the city

In his widely quoted article **The Origins of Migrant Labour, Colonialism , and the Under-development of Southern Mozambique** David foregrounds this problem

“ The problem of whether people migrate voluntarily or not is a difficult one, and the point is a central one in all social science “ (Webster , 1977, 251)

Here David is referring to the classic debate between structure and agency . He emphatically rejects the voluntary argument and writes :

My own view is that actors operating within a given social structure ---- may believe they are free , yet they do exactly what the structure dictates – the problem of choice has already been decided for them. The real issue is one of **power**, and in this case the industrial and colonial/imperialist power was so overwhelming as to incorporate the small-scale rural societies of Mozambique from which the migrants were drawn and to dictate economic behavior there” (Webster, 1979,271)

David goes on to identify a range of external ‘push ‘ factors that propelled the peasants towards the gold mines. He mentions historical factors such as the slave trade and Zulu raiders in the nineteenth century but focuses mainly on Portuguese colonialism, the imposition of taxes , and the requirements of Shitalo (forced labour)

David was developing both a **methodological** and a **theoretical** critique of the conventional wisdom on migrant labour. Methodologically David’s answer is significant in that he is shifting the weight of the explanation for migrancy from individual choice to social structure . Conventional explanations for the high degree of migrancy amongst Chopi society had focused on the fact that its kinship system gave a great latitude to individual choice. This emphasis on individual choice in Chopi society arose , it was argued, out of the distinctive system of kinship and marriage , together with the inheritance and succession patterns, that delayed young men inheriting wealth and status until late in life. This particular form of adelphic succession practiced amongst the Chopi meant that,“

Young men , who would have to wait many years for advancement in the traditional system , were ripe for the picking when the recruitment agents arrived “ (Webster, 1979:261)

In developing this critique David was implicitly challenging his supervisor and long time mentor David Hammond-Tooke when he wrote of those of his colleagues who `neglected to take cognizance of the fact that the society studied is part of a wider whole , be it political and /or economic ,with its colonial or neo-colonial dominance /dependence. ... To ignore these factors impinging on Chopi-Tsonga societies, would be to do violence to social reality “ (Webster, 1979:236-237)

By stressing the importance of `external factors’ , David was following in the foot steps of the Manchester School of Anthropology and Godfrey Wilson in particular. In a sharp break from conventional anthropology’s focus on small scale societies, Wilson was to focus on the **global forces** that were wreaking havoc with tribal society in Northern Rhodesia in the forties as they were drawn as migrant labourers into the city of Broken Hill on the Copperbelt . Michael Burawoy calls this focus by ethnographers on external global forces **global ethnography** , a label I am sure David would have been comfortable with (Burawoy, 2000)

But David’s research on migrant labour had also led him to develop a theoretical critique of the economic liberalism dominant in the English speaking universities at that time. This strong laissez-faire liberalism advocated no state intervention, free market relationships and free wage labour. It had developed in opposition to the state interventionism of the apartheid state. David , like generations of students before him at Rhodes University in the sixties, was taught that South Africa had a **dual economy** , where an advanced industrial sector existed side-by-side with a poorly developed subsistence agricultural sector. Development , for the holders of this view, was a matter of allowing market forces to take their course , so that , as industry develops, so too will job opportunities and wages , which will feed back to the rural areas via the migrant labour system.

David's research , however, led him to question the market economy's promise of a 'trickle down ' effect on rural areas . Instead he found himself drawn to **dependency theory** which emphasized the subordinate position of the periphery in relation to the core . Instead of rising living conditions in the rural areas he found that migrant labour was **reproducing underdevelopment** . The absence of the potentially progressive young and the accompanying decline in agricultural productivity meant that economic self sufficiency slipped further away , ensuring the necessity of further migrant trips. (Webster 1977:266/267) . This resulted, David concluded, in a vicious cycle of poverty as the rural areas of Southern Africa were steadily underdeveloped . Indeed these poverty stricken rural areas performed a useful function for employers, David, argued by reproducing cheap migrant labour for the mines (Webster 1977: 236)

After completing his PHD David began to focus more on the creative responses of migrants in the city . He began to see labour migration as a strategic decision migrants made and not simply as forced labour . It led to a deep interest in the cultural formations these workers created in the towns – their music – illustrated tonight by Johnny Clegg - , their dance, indeed , all aspects of the migrants social world. However he was deeply offended by what he called the **popular anthropological** approaches to black workers sold by consultants to ignorant white managers. These consultants assumed that the most important fact about African workers is not that they are workers, but that they belong to different cultures which had to be sympathetically understood. For these consultants , African working class culture was a disabling force used to explain the alleged low productivity of black workers

In a hard-hitting article written for the SALB in 1976 he takes these consultants to task. He cites Raymond Silberbauer,

misleadingly and insultingly , telling white managers that `The migrant African worker who comes to work in town is not accustomed to doors and the ritual of knocking and waiting for an answer” (Webster, 1976:55) Others, he wrote , go even further in their caricature and ignorance of African working life. The one that stands out is the argument that African workers are prone to illegal striking and make unreasonable demands that they expect to be instantly met because they are instantly breast fed as children !!!

` Unlike the white child who is fed at regular intervals-usually every four hours – the black baby is fed only when he cries for it. From infancy, this develops an expectation in the child that his needs will be satisfied on demand ... Against this background he may easily interpret his collective bargaining power merely as a way in which to put demands which must be satisfied , and not a medium for negotiating the basic agreement” (quoted in Webster 1981: 105)

Let me now turn to Amartya Sen

In Amartya Sen’s book Development as Freedom he defines development as the expansion of capabilities . (Sen, 1999) This has become known as the **capability approach** . **The capability approach** has become very influential in development theory and practice (Sen 1999: 66) Indeed the human development index (HDI) which has been developed by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) is based on the capability approach . It consists of three weighted indices:

- life expectancy
- educational attainment
- income security.

David would have been attracted to this notion of development. After all, his commitment was to freedom; he was a founder member of the Five Freedoms Forum and the Detainees Support Committee. But David is likely to have been sceptical of Sen's faith in free markets, free speech and reasoned social progress. This is because, as Sandbrook argues, Sen abstracts freedom from power relations and focuses on individual actors. This gives a false promise to the poor and excluded. Sen does not challenge the concentration of economic power, centred on global and national markets. Instead he takes them for granted. (Sandbrook, 2000)

This is why David would have been skeptical of Sen's approach.

David would find the idea that participation in markets represents economic freedom unconvincing. He would remind Sen that free markets are sometimes not all that **free**. He would cite his studies in southern Mozambique where peasants were dragooned into the labour market – first as forced labour, and later through the imposition of taxes. They were, David would say, **forced to be free**. Indeed he would argue that free choice for these migrant workers is a sad joke as they are so poor that they have nothing left to sell but their labour.

More fundamentally, he would question Sen's assumption that market exchange is natural to society. As Karl Polanyi has argued, liberal economists commit a fundamental error in supposing that a particular form of economic system – market exchange – is universal in time and place. Markets in the form of places where people exchange goods have existed throughout history. However, **the market system**, in which everyone satisfies their needs by treating land, labour and money as commodities, is an invention of the past two centuries. (Polanyi, 2001)

Polanyi's analysis holds powerful implications for development strategy . If the market system is not natural to human society , we are free to imagine alternative forms of economic organisation that might better accord with societies priorities. We could seek , in Polanyi's terms, to **'re-embed'** the economy in society in order to curb the destructive side effects in the commodification of all things. Interestingly, leading supporters of the market system such as George Soros , warned over a decade ago of the destructive effects of the unregulated market in creating insecurity and inequality. **Sen does not, unfortunately, consider the possibility of such harmful tendencies of the free market.**

The destructive tendencies of unregulated market growth have now been brought sharply home to us through the current global economic crisis. In his enthusiastic account of the way in which globalisation is 'flattening the world' , Thomas Friedman introduces , half way through his book *The Earth is Flat*, a note of caution. He mentions a conversation with his two daughters in which he bluntly advises them : 'Girls ,when I was growing up, my parents used to say to me, 'Tom , finish your dinner- people in India and China are starving ' My advise to you is: 'Girls , finish your homework – people in China and India are starving for your jobs'' (cited in Webster, Lambert and Bezuidenhout, 2008)

Indeed, the world is not flat; it is highly uneven. For around 100 years = 1870-1970 – the US witnessed an unprecedented trend of rising productivity and rising real wages for working people. This lies at the heart of the American Dream and the American way of life – two cars, a suburban home and a TV set in every room . But since the seventies US economic domination began to be challenged as the worlds centre of production shifted to the Asian Tigers and China in particular. With the collapse of communism and the opening up of the previously protected markets of Russia , Eastern Europe, India and China , capitalism became truly global for the first time in history. In fact the world labour market

doubled – from one and half billion to three billion. But the significance of this doubling of the labour market was not simply an increase in the number of workers ; the significance lies in the fact that these workers came into the market at a much lower wage rate and without the protection that workers in the North had won after a century of struggle.

This is the first global change . The second is the fact that these export led Asian countries depend on the US to provide a boundless consumer market. This is the irony of the global economy : US consumerism is being kept afloat through increasing credit , credit increasingly derived from communist China! In other words, China is playing a crucial role in financing US debt , and therefore , US consumption. China has developed the worlds' largest foreign exchange reserves - \$2 trillion , at least \$650 billion of which is in US treasury bonds . In fact China held over \$300 billion – 10% of their GDP- in Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac. (Makgetla, 2009) In theory, China could pull the plug on the US economy , although a move to sell their assets would further damage China's export industries . Is 2009 the year that China saves US capitalism ?

The third and fundamental change in the global economy is the widespread deregulation of finance since the seventies . This allows people to operate in the financial sector to increase their leverage, i.e. , their levels of debt to the assets they own. It allows investors greater leverage to increase speculative activities and risk taking.

As we all know , the catalyst that brought about the current global crisis was the collapse of the sub-prime market in the US. Americans had been responding to the booming markets by borrowing against their houses at a sub-prime rate . That is they were receiving housing loans they could not afford because the

interest was sub-prime . The assumption was that , as the interest escalating over the duration of the mortgage, the borrower would have an increased capacity to pay the instalments as their career progressed. This is similar to the assumptions behind BEE !!!

The result of this irresponsible lending by finance houses was the creation of unsustainable debt – laden households. Indeed the average US household has lost over a quarter of their assets over the last six months!!

This growth in the power and influence of finance over the rest of the economy is best described as the financialization of capital. . Financialisation, Mohammed argues, is the term used to describe the current era because it encourages investors to focus on speculation and not long-term industrialization and job creation . Instead financiers aim to maximize their short-term returns rather building long term sustainable businesses . (**Mohamed, 2009**)

Sen , I would suggest , has a far too optimistic view of the ethical foundations of contemporary capitalism and fails to convincingly demonstrate why he believes that widening inequality is not endemic in unregulated capitalism .

Conclusion : David's legacy

Clearly Sen's emphasis on human development is a great step forward in development discourse. But from our conversation this evening with David Webster and Amartya Sen I draw the conclusion that the idea of **development as an expansion of freedom** is a more tumultuous and conflictual process than Sen's rather sanguine theory suggests. Sen's lack of attention to the destructive effects of the unregulated market , his neglect of unequal power in the global economy and his over –emphasis on

individual choice, rather than collective action, has leads us to a certain skepticism towards Sen .

But Davids legacy goes beyond his scholarly work. Unlike most people who go through a temporary phase of radicalism while students that rapidly fades with age, David's commitment to social transformation was more like a journey that deepened as he got older. Initially he tried to bring his colleagues along with him . In 1981 he formed CADS - **the Conference of Academics for a Democratic Society** – as a pressure group designed to persuade the university to become more involved in the excluded communities. In a statement of principle for CADS he wrote:

“We must be prepared to broaden our concept of education beyond the boundaries traditionally imposed on it; the boundaries of ivory towers and scholarly monasticism. We have to understand that education is that which enables people to take control of their own lives . We are thus involved in a social practice which is potentially a major force in the struggle for a just and democratic society and we must face up to the consequences of that involvement” (quoted in Webster, 1989:90)

In a prophetic article written shortly before his assassination he wrote of the consequences of anti-apartheid scholar-activism :

“ Assassinations’, he wrote, ‘ are used as one of the methods of controlling government opposition when all other methods such as detention or intimidation have failed (quoted in Webster, 1989:90)

This I believe is the real legacy of David Webster ; the challenge his life's work to us as academics and activists is to go beyond the ivory tower and become **active citizens in the creation of a democratic society** . Market society is a contradictory society; on the one hand markets **destroy** , undermine, fracture and fragment society. On the other hand, they also **create** , what Polanyi calls,

an **active society**, where individuals come together in groups and movements , generating cultures of solidarity and resistance.(Webster, Lambert, Bezuidenhout, 2008)

It its attempt to dominate civil society the apartheid state detained some of David's students in 1981 , in particular Barbara Hogan . It was this that was to catapult David into the role that led to his tragic assassination on that fateful May day morning . It would be a matter of great pride and pleasure for David that his past student Barbara Hogan , now Minister of Health, but previously chair of the finance committee in parliament where she courageously fought her colleagues over the arms deal and AIDS denialism under President Mbeki. . (Feinstein, 2008)

We often hear of those who speak truth to power; but it takes a special kind of courage to speak truth to those in power in the organisation within which you owe your loyalty , your career and your livelihood. That is David's legacy; he spoke the truth to those in power whether it be the apartheid state, his comrades in the democratic movement, or his colleagues and senior management at Wits University – and he inspired others to do the same.

Thank you David.

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