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Ineptitude, ignorance, or intent: the social construction of failure in development

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The Social Construction of Failure in Development

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<u>ABSTRACT:</u>
This paper explores the social construction of failure in development policy and academic narratives. Talk of failure is commonplace in development, and this paper seeks to use that as a heuristic to understand what that it signifies beyond face value. Drawing on a wide range of primary and secondary texts to provide illustrative evidence, the paper explores how failure is constructed, and advances a three-fold typology of failures that vary in terms of their positionality, the critical variables they identify as responsible, their epistemological stance, and the importance they accord to politics.

1. Introduction

In the looking glass world of development,[1] pessimism reigns, and things always fall apart. Dysfunctionality, collapse, disaster, poverty, famine, violence, and exploitation are not words used to signify the extraordinary, but are the normal vocabulary of everyday business. Many of the widely available texts on the subject present themselves as analytics of failure. The title of Daron Acemoglu and James Robinson's book is *Why Nations Fail*. James Scott's seminal book *Seeing Like A State* has the sub-title *How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition have Failed*". Paul Collier's *Bottom Billion* is similarly about *Why the Poorest Countries are Failing*. Dambisa Moyo's book on *Dead Aid* is about *Why Aid is not Working*. Bill Easterly's book on the *White Man's Burden* is about *Why the West's Efforts to Aid the Rest have done so much Ill*".

Negativity forms the everyday mood music in an environment where people are required to adopt a certain posture of mandatory outrage towards the underlying condition, as well as an air of impatience at the inadequate and flawed attempts to remedy it. In the conclusion to her monograph *The Will to Improve*, Tania Li writes of the 'profound limits' to development: 'For vast numbers of people, it falls short of the promise to make the world better than it is (Li 2007:283). Arturo Escobar's (1995:5) book on development discourse presents a similar dystopia where 'instead of the kingdom of abundance promised by theorists and politicians in the 1950s, the discourse and strategy of development produced its opposite: massive underdevelopment and impoverishment, untold exploitation and oppression.'

There are however, important reasons to be circumspect about this pervasive negativity, and to understand what it signifies beyond face value. At one level, failure simply attracts disproportionate attention. David Lewis (2005:474) notes, 'the dominant emphasis has been to understand the reasons why they [development projects] fail with few studies bothering to understand why some projects succeed'. Development is famously a fluid, contested category with competing goals and metrics of success, so that every successful project can also be found to have failed by a different measure. Similarly, the existence of a variety of opposing 'stakeholders' means that what amounts to success for one group can be a costly failure for another.

However, even when the goals and beneficiaries are unambiguous, the evidence base upon which this judgment can be made is complicated and contradictory. The intense 'worm wars' debate over the randomised control trial evidence of mass de-worming in east Africa demonstrates the extent to which the most authoritative and cutting-edge forms of impact evaluation can later be viewed as flawed and misleading (Miguel and Kremer 2004, Aiken et al 2015). The problems do not end there. Success and failure remain ephemeral and contested even when the evidence is accurate and uncontroversial. Paul Mosley (1986) describes the macro-micro paradox: how project success at the micro level often has no commensurate impact on macro level indicators of development. Andrew Natsios (2010) explains that because evaluations are often judged on the basis of 'countable' outputs,

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[1] The idea of development as a looking-glass world is borrowed from Raymond Apthorpe's (2011) 'Alice in Aidland'.

agency staff tend to promote projects that are amenable to easy measurement at the expense of more complex, developmentally transformative ones which cannot be easily enumerated. Consequently, many projects that are judged as successes at their end date are later found to have failed. Roger Riddell (2008:186) estimates that between 10%-25% of projects fail to meet immediate objectives, but judged in terms of impact several years hence, it is as high as 60%.

One of the most widespread concerns about declarations of failure is that the criteria for determining success are arbitrary, based on 'before versus after' comparisons of outcomes to pre-determined objectives, irrespective of whether those objectives were ever achievable.[2] Bill Easterley (2009) for example, argues that the design of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and their unachievable targets rendered what were actually impressive successes in Africa to be categorised as demoralising failures. Similarly, Kumar and Corbridge (2002) argue that DFID's Eastern India Rainfed Farming Project (EIRFP) actually succeeded in many economic measures, but was declared a failure because it did not meet criteria that even its planners would probably agree, were impossible to meet.

The problem of inappropriate outcome criteria is related to a broader methodological concern arising from the absence of appropriate real-world counter-factuals to make judgements against, and also from the issue of attribution - that is, isolating causality. Outside of the small subset of cases where counter-factual analysis is possible, for example, through the availability of randomised treatment and control groups of adequate size, how can one distinguish whether success or failure is to be attributed to the project intervention, to the underlying conditions, or to other exogenous and incidental factors?

Finally, even beyond the illusion of countables and absent counter-factuals, success and failure can also be openly manipulated. As Parker and Allen (2014) describe at length, large donor-funded public health programmes in East Africa were continued, despite the fact that they did not work well. This occurred initially amidst a lack of knowledge and evidence - but later when evidence of weak uptake and widespread problems was collected and made available, a façade of 'success' was maintained by public health officials through strategic ignorance (McGoey 2012), as well as by actively seeking to suppress and discredit contrary evidence.

What this means is that in evaluating the rhetoric of failure, it is important to bear in mind that real world development outcomes are notoriously complex to evaluate. Success or failure thus amount to much more than the accurate measurement of objective indicators, and are in many cases, the outcome of a certain process of negotiation and mediation. As Fejerskov (2016:366) notes in a case study of a manifestly dysfunctional development initiative, the evaluation outcome was indeed a 'negotiated truth' such that 'the potential success of development projects does not necessarily have any connection to measurable results, but rather is found in the interpretation of events and actions'. Similarly, many external evaluators will recount with exasperation how project funders and agency staff with access to draft copies of evaluation reports vigorously challenge any negative findings

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[2] On 'counterfeit' counterfactuals, see (Gertler et al, 2016).

with a view to influencing the interpretation of failure and minimising personal culpability in the final version.

In other words, failure cannot be seen as a self-evident outcome, but amounts to a particular performance that must be enacted, or a representation that must be generated. As David Mosse (2005) describes, in his ethnography of a rural development project in western India:

development success is not merely a question of measures of performance; it is also about how particular interpretations are made and sustained **socially**. *It is not just about what a project does, but also how and to whom it speaks, who can be made to believe in it* (Mosse 2005:158).

Even in the formal and substantive evaluations of development outcomes, the verdict of failure must be actively constructed through a long chain of actions that begins with the decision over goals, the identification of measurement indicators, the way the data is collected, collated, and analysed, and the way results are contextualised, elaborated, and interpreted.

The *constructed* nature of development failure does not mean that evaluations are all fiction, that careful measurements are impossible, or that rigorous evaluations should be cast aside. It does however, mean that there is more to failure than failure. The final judgments of effectiveness based on these evaluations often amount to much more than the sum of the parts. Indeed, unlike many other related fields, such as science and technology studies, the constructed nature of development effectiveness is less controversial, and easier to illustrate. The idea that scientific knowledge is socially constructed within the laboratory (Latour and Woolger 1979) is contested and even ridiculed as absurd by real world scientists. A similar accusation about development effectiveness evaluation would, however, likely encounter less resistance by a jury of peers composed of real world development professionals.

The idea that failure is *socially* constructed (Berger and Luckmann 1966) is significant insofar as any evaluation is not an individual effort, but requires the collaboration of a community of actors to produce and consume it: a collective who frame it in that way, and to whom it belongs and speaks to. It follows then that narratives of development can often say more of the narrators themselves, and of the way that they choose to see and frame the evidence in particular ways. As Entman (1993:52) describes, this process of framing is:

to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem, definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation and/or treatment recommendation.

The counter-part to the production process of such narratives is its consumption, and the way that its consumers are clustered in communities that adopt particular versions of what the social psychology literature has explained as the 'confirmation bias'. As Nickerson (1998:

175) describes, this involves 'the seeking or interpreting of evidence in ways that are partial to existing beliefs, expectations, or a hypothesis in hand'.

There is an important corollary to this: the existence of different social collectives, disciplinary traditions, and moral frames of reference within the development field means that there are different constructions of failure that are possible. The same project can be seen to have failed for different reasons by different groups of people, and moreover, these reasons can be incompatible with one another. This is the case for example with the evaluation of structural adjustment, one of the most important and controversial policy interventions in the 1980s and 1990s. Although there is widespread agreement that structural adjustment lending and conditionality-based policy reforms failed, the available diagnoses differ radically.

Failure is on the one hand, attributed in numerous World Bank documents of the 1980s to an implementation problem: that is, the failure of its borrowers (developing country governments) to implement the agreed conditionalities. In more considered accounts, this inability is explained in terms of a lack of ownership, weak capacity, poor governance, or political instability. Writing from within the World Bank, Dollar and Svenson (2000: 895) find that more than one-third of adjustment programmes fail, and that 'domestic political economy variables' such as political instability or length of government tenure are primarily responsible. Importantly, these domestic problems are assumed to be independent and exogenous: that is, they are the cause of programme failure, not its consequence.

In contrast, external critiques of structural adjustment often blame the lender rather than the borrower. Within this, there are two versions: firstly it is criticised as a poorly designed 'cookie-cutter' approach that lacked an understanding of the local political, economic, and social context. As a result, it was so deeply flawed that it caused negative developmental consequences, ranging variously from poverty to de-industrialisation (Cornia et al 1987, Harrigan and Mosley 1991, Easterly 2005, Huber and Solt 2004, Weyland 2004). Moreover, and in sharp contrast to the causal logic that political instability caused programme failure, influential variants of this explanation suggests the opposite: that it was flawed structural adjustment programmes that generated political instability and poor governance.

Secondly, a very different explanation describes the failure of structural adjustment as the product of a hidden agenda to promote the predatory economic ambition of wealthy domestic and international elites. David Harvey's (1995) distinction between neoliberalism in theory versus practice provides one version of this narrative. He finds that behind the technocratic promise of a market utopia lies its real objective, which is a political project for the restoration and deepening of capitalist class rule. Within critical development studies, this explanation belongs to the family tree of dependency theory, which is not just generally critical of the efficacy of market-friendly economic solutions, but specifically views it as a way through which poor countries are adversely incorporated and trapped in an exploitative relationship within a global economic hierarchy.

Consider also the critique of 'liberal peacebuilding' and the role of development actors in countries affected by violent conflict. The attempt to recreate stable public authority and

economic growth in divided societies from Afghanistan to the Democratic Republic of Congo is widely thought to be inadequate and flawed. As with structural adjustment though, there are many versions of failure which do not just identify different causes, but adopt entirely different analytical perspectives to approach it.

The failure of liberal peacebuilding is on the one hand, found to arise because of poor coordination between military and civilian actors, bad sequencing between agencies, inadequate funding, a top-heavy international presence, or other such operational issues (SIGIR 2013). Other accounts explain the failure of the mission in terms of the inability to understand local society and politics, so that the mission is based on a flawed understanding of the dynamics of change (Paris 2004, Uvin 1998). Finally, there is, a distinct strand of writing which faults liberal peacebuilding as a project of imperialist or neoliberal capture (Duffield 2001), so that the enduring chaos and failure of the project belies the fact that it actually serves an ulterior motive that serves powerful outside actors.

The project may well have failed on its own terms, but the hidden agenda will have prevailed and succeeded. In both of these examples, the common consensus that the project has failed occludes the fact that there are distinct variants of failure in circulation, and moreover, that these bear assumptions, diagnoses, and implications that stand entirely at odds with one another.

This paper is primarily concerned with the idea of failure in development. It seeks to analyse narratives of failure in order to understand what they amount to, how they are structured, and what their implications are. What are the consequences of this pessimism for the larger enterprise and project of development, and can it be said to have productive effects? These questions are approached by decomposing failure narratives into a three-fold typology of failure narratives that relate to their disciplinary origins, epistemological stance, and the way that they articulate 'the political'.

The significance of politics as a category of explanation here requires greater explanation. In an industry that has famously been described as the 'anti-politics machine', and that draws its theoretical basis and framings within the positivist tradition of mainstream academic economics, it is this relationship between politics and the technical-scientific core of development theory that has received the greatest attention in critical studies of development. Since the 1980s, politics has gained an increasing presence, both in the 'political turn' of mainstream development theory, and also in the way it has been incorporated into practice (Carrothers and De Gramont 2013). As Dollar and Svenson (2000:894) describe:

Development assistance shifted to a large extent in the 1980s from financing investment (roads and dams) to promoting policy reform. This reorientation arose from a growing awareness that developing countries were held back more by poor policies than by a lack of finance for investment.

The growth of politics as a category of relevance within the theory and practice of development has occurred alongside the discovery of the ubiquity of politics and micro-

power in the social sciences more broadly, particularly after Foucault. The idea that 'everything is political' has been important in revealing the complex operation and effects of power across the social landscape in far more sophisticated ways (Curtis and Spencer 2012). Power and politics are not restricted to the formality of the state and electoral competition, but are present in discourse, subjectivity, and even everyday forms of behaviour. The implications of this expansive ontology of politics are significant, and have opened up new landscapes of investigation and speculative reflection.

However, the incorporation of politics in development and beyond also means that it can also take a certain magical, fetishized character: it assumes the form of an omnipresent, supernatural force of boundless, unfathomable dimensions and capacities that can be held responsible for any number of outcomes as well as their very opposites. Politics is deemed to be everywhere in spirit, and is constantly spoken of in development. But it is also elusive, and difficult to grasp and predict, so that it often requires the mediation of a priestly interlocutor, learnèd in ethnographic methods and critical development theory to make it visible and accessible. The fact that many development agency and project staff have a science or engineering background, or else are quantitative economists also lends a mystique of the unknown to the political, which is consequently used to box in a wide range of otherwise inexplicable acts of mundane misfortune.

There is as such, a need to de-mystify politics, to parse its meaning, to challenge those that use it to explain themselves better. While it is well beyond the scope and space available in this paper to address this task adequately, the analysis of failure narratives provides an opportunity to denaturalise politics, and to take a step in this direction.

In terms of definitions, it should be clear by now that development in this paper primarily concerns what Gillian Hart (2001) describes as 'big-D', the enterprise that Cowen and Shenton (1996) describe as purposive or intentional development. It is the world of policies, planners, and projects. The protagonists of relevance here are those who produce, consume, and circulate development narratives: national policy-makers, aid donor staff, academics, think tanks researchers, journalists, evaluation experts, parliamentary committees, NGO activists, and advocacy groups. Yet, the alternate use of the word, 'little-d' development, or the universe of immanent ongoing socio-economic change (what Hart 2001:650 describes the 'development of capitalism as a geographically uneven, profoundly contradictory set of historical processes'), also has a critical presence in the discursive construction of development failure because it constitutes the underlying problematic. Little-d development constitutes the space where poverty, insecurity, ill health, and corruption are said to be located and where they are reproduced. It is in that sense, the underlying pathology that resists solution, and that hence, plays a critical role in sustaining the perpetual cycle of failure.

As a study of policy narratives and texts, this paper is connected to the tradition of discourse analysis in development studies (Escobar 1995, Apthorpe 1986, Ferguson 1994, Crush 1995). The study of authoritative policy and operational documents contains important insights about the way that development is conceived, how its key metaphors function, how it is imbricated with power, and how deeply political matters are rendered

into bland technicalities and jargon. However, the approach in this paper is also a departure from this tradition to the extent that although it is based upon the review of a large number of primary texts, including over one hundred World Bank project documents,[3] it is not a systematic study of discourse as such. Rather, it draws upon a wide range of accessible primary and secondary texts to provide illustrative evidence as needed to advance an argument that is largely conceptual and theoretical in nature. Secondly, in this paper, I view much of the discourse analysis literature not just as fraternal and contextual points of reference but also as an important part of the empirical matter under study. That is, the work for example, of Arturo Escobar or James Ferguson should be seen not just for their insights, but also because they themselves constitute original, influential and significant development narratives. They must as such, necessarily be viewed as objects of study to be placed within the frame of analysis, to be situated against other such representations of development failure.

The following three sections elaborate on the core subject matter of this paper, by providing an outline of three types of development failures. These are, in brief: implementation failures, design failures, and agenda failures. Implementation failures diagnose development outcomes as management or logistical issues. Design failures understand failure as the result of flawed analytics and inadequate knowledge of the problem. Finally, agenda failures explain the problem as the result of irredeemably hierarchical nature of development and the hidden, self-serving political motivations at play.

2. IMPLEMENTATION FAILURE

The most basic narrative of development failure is in the technical realm of implementation. Failures of this kind arise quite simply because the planned intervention is not executed properly according to its specification. The overall objective, rationale, framework, or design of the project itself is not under scrutiny, so that the diagnosis lies either in management issues such as balancing the time-cost-quality triangle, or in disruptions by entirely exogenous, unplanned risk factors. For example, quantitative studies drawn from the World Bank's database of internal evaluations of over 11,000 projects have identified the key sources of failure as supervision (Kilby 2000), cost and schedule over-runs (Ahsan and Gunawan 2010), or proper monitoring and evaluation (Raimondo 2016).

Implementation failures are typically assembled within the internal 'engine room' of development organisations, where the analytical imagination is constrained not just by its cognitive frames of technicality but also by a heavy dose of reality arising from an intimate knowledge of what is operationally feasible. When translated into the context of policy rather than a project, implementation failures are often described as 'governance' failures.

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[3] Of a total 11,747 projects in the World Bank internal evaluation online database, 365 are rated 'highly satisfactory', 2359 are 'moderately satisfactory', 2884 are 'moderately unsatisfactory', 5701 are 'satisfactory', 2043 are 'unsatisfactory', and 158 are 'highly unsatisfactory'. I reviewed all of the project completion and evaluation documents of the 'highly unsatisfactory' category which are accessible online, and 25 reports randomly drawn from the 'unsatisfactory' and 'moderately unsatisfactory' category.

This genre of critique, and the way it attributes responsibility within the bounds of implementation corresponds to a particular analytical approach in which failure, dysfunctionality or collapse are viewed as a straight-forward function of a set of self-evident, proximate, direct causal factors, and to a positivist epistemological stance that understands these observable variables to yield answers through causal analysis. In conflict studies, this would be termed an analysis of 'trigger factors' of the outbreak of violence, rather than the deeper structural factors.

Implementation failures also often constitute the verdict produced by project monitoring and evaluation, in which a given logframe is the basis on which auditors check whether specified activities have been carried out to schedule, and measure if objectively verifiable outcome indicators have been met. For example, the internal evaluation of a $48 million World Bank project on health in Cameroon initiated in 1995 showed it to be 'highly unsatisfactory'. The reasons for this were that the: 'project scope was well beyond the Government's implementation capacities, and implementation was delayed because of poor project preparation, inexperience and rapid turnover of Government staff, and lack of timely availability of counterpart funding' (World Bank 2002). Another such World Bank internal evaluation of a $50 million road infrastructure project in Kenya from 1984 ascribes failure to 'inadequate organization within the Ministry of Transport and Communications and a lack of counterpart financing' (World Bank 1995). Indeed, in the 1% of World Bank projects rated internally as 'highly unsatisfactory', it is such issues as lack of capacity, funding, ownership, or oversight that are most commonly found by internal evaluators to be at fault (World Bank IEG database).

One of the largest and most ambitious such project evaluations that has ever been conducted is of the reconstruction of Iraq in 2003-13 in the aftermath of the US-led military invasion that deposed the regime of Saddam Hussein. Among other important and disturbing details, the final report of the US Special Inspector General for Iraq Reconstruction (SIGIR 2013) revealed that $8 billion of the total $60 billion spent was either wasted or unaccounted for. However, what stands out in this otherwise comprehensive and rigorous account is that it is silent on the original sin that fathered these subsequent problems. In place of any mention of the military invasion of Iraq in 2003 and the enduring destabilisation that it engendered, the report instead identifies seven key operational problems. These are (i) better civil-military coordination; (ii) focus on small projects and the need to wait for security to be established before rebuilding; (iii) ensuring host-country buy-in; (iv) better systems to manage inter-agency conflict; (v) better oversight and accountability; (vi) preserve and refine success stories; (vii) better planning, advance planning.

Failure is - without any hint of irony - attributed to a narrow set of technical shortcomings that seem to manifestly evade mention of the obvious political elephants in the room. In James Ferguson's (1994) description of the anti-politics machine, sanitised narratives of implementation failures of this kind are imbued with deeper, hidden, political import. However, if instead of reading a pre-determined view of politics into a text, one looks instead for the ways that 'the political' is actually understood and used within it, then there are a different set of insights available. In the landscape of technical-managerial

development and the knowledge frames that it rests on, politics is not absent by thoughtless omission, or as Tania Li (2007) describes, because it has been neutered and 'rendered technical'. Politics is absent simply because it is *terra incognita*: an unknown, uncharted zone located outside the frame of competence and that can hence not be properly understood or anticipated. Where it appears, 'politics' is understood as a category of exogenous risk to the implementation of the economic or scientific technicalities of the project, not dissimilar to the way 'acts of god' are understood in contract law.

For example, the World Bank's $15 million enterprise rehabilitation project in the Central African Republic in 1999 was found internally to have failed due to 'severe political instability', and there is also the indication that many of the project files were destroyed in this violence (World Bank 2000). Similarly, a public sanitation project in Moldova in 2007, which, its evaluators stressed, was sound and worthwhile, collapsed and was cancelled because of 'political pressure'. As the evaluation described:

Though the objectives of the project were relevant and consistent with country strategies, and the design if implemented was relevant and so likely to achieve the project outcomes, … During implementation, disputes on land registration and opposition to the use of the land for the waste water treatment plant re-emerged, contributing to a lack of implementation progress (World Bank 2014).

That is, implementation failed because politics occurred. Politics is in that sense, seen as a largely unanticipated disturbance that stands outside the frame of analysis or reference, that interrupted the planned execution of the project. The implication is that in the absence of this factor, the project would have successfully met its objectives. Similarly, failures in the International Monetary Fund (IMF)'s programmes have also been attributed to unanticipated political factors - 'ethnic and linguistic divisions, strong special interests, and lack of political cohesion' – which are clearly beyond the control of the programme's planners and implementers (Ivanova et al 2001: 1).

To summarise, in the field of implementation, the diagnosis of failure lies with proximate problems in completing the project, not with the objective or design of the project itself. Politics is present insofar as it constitutes an exogenous risk factor that often serves to influence the outcome, but that is not linked to the project logic. As a result, it is left largely un-analysed, and is often presented as an obscure and unknown factor. This is not to say that putatively political matters as such are entirely absent, because many issues such as social capital, civil society, governance, participation, or gender empowerment have long since been integrated as core elements of the development agenda (Bebbington et al 2004). But having thus been understood, incorporated, and turned into project implementables, they are no longer part of what constitutes that unknown and unpredictable void that constitutes the political.

3. DESIGN FAILURE
Secondly, there is a deeper and more critical level of analysis that views failure not because of flawed implementation, but because of a flawed plan. That is, the fault lies not with the

management and execution, but in the underlying design of the intervention itself, so that it cannot, even if well implemented, have succeeded. This explanation suggests that there are weaknesses in the goals, assumptions, metrics, and analytics, born essentially of a failure to grasp the complexities of the problem at hand.

Failure of this kind draws on an epistemological stance that visualises the problem not as isolated and self-contained, but as a component of an underlying systemic failure. The analogy from conflict analysis would thus explain violence not in terms of its superficial trigger factors, but in terms of a wider circle of causation than is immediately apparent. The diagnostics thus takes the outcome (failure) as an entry point to excavating and revealing that larger system. What this means is that rather than identifying the problem as one of 'governance' failures, this approach would seek to probe beyond that, to seek out why it is that governance fails.

The fact that such failures arise from inadequate knowledge of the underlying dynamics at work means that it is often analysed by those who claim expert knowledge in the science and social science of development. While earlier design failures were often attributed to poor scientific knowledge (for example the 1947 Tanganyika groundnut scheme, which failed because of inappropriate soil and rainfall conditions), the changing nature of development since the 1970s has increasingly found that it is poor *social science* knowledge that is wanting.[4] Raymond Apthorpe's (1970:7, cited in Porter 1995) observation on the discovery of the 'human factor' from the 1960s captures this phenomenon well:

There is a recurring tendency to explain the failure of predominantly economic development plans by invoking the following reason. There must have been a troublesome knob on the development machine, marked "the human factor," which was twiddled wrongly, inadequately, or not at all, and therefore, somehow, "the non-economic variables" were left out of account.

Indeed, it is at this level that many of the well known academic critiques of development engage, based on expertise in economics, politics, and area studies. In *Development Projects Observed*, Albert Hirschman (1967) describes how project design has inherent cognitive limitations, and must contend with a wide range of unpredictables. James Scott (1998) argues that planners at the apex, 'seeing like a state' have a limited ability to grasp the realities on the ground, so that their promethean visions of top-down transformation have perverse and tragic outcomes. Robert Chambers (1983) has similarly diagnosed failure as a product of the inadequate understanding of what poor people need or know.

The challenges of implementing policy reform in the 1980s, and the search for why 'good policies' repeatedly fail to be implemented has drawn the development agenda and the study of development deeper into the realm of politics. Adrian Leftwich (2005:574) explains that the failure of development in the early 1980s signified a new understanding that the economic goals of transformation could only succeed if it was understood to be embedded

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[4] Moreover, the growth of new fields such as behavioural economics is increasingly pushing the frontier out further, so that development failures are being identified not in social or economic structures, but in the human mind (World Bank 2014).

within political ground realities. The turning point was, as he explains, 'the recognition that non-economic factors – primarily political, but also social and cultural – needed to be much more fully comprehended. In the 1990s, influential critiques of the role of aid in conflict - such as Peter Uvin's (1998) work on the role of foreign aid in the Rwandan genocide - led to a further impetus for the political sensitisation of development aid.

As such, development failures which identified a flaw in the project design carried an entirely different understanding of 'the political'. Politics no longer presented itself an unknowable external risk factor, but became the missing element of the project design that required recognition and insertion. This shift is evident in the changing analysis of failure in World Bank project evaluations in the 1990s. In contrast to those of the 1980s that found 'capacity' or 'political will' at fault, the internal evaluation of a failed $20 million World Bank project on devolved service delivery in Guinea scheduled over 2000-11 was far more critical of the inability to anticipate the political sensitivities at stake:

In a project involving deconcentration and devolution, the Bank team should have a strong understanding of the political economy of reform, and anticipate the opposition in order to inform project planning. (World Bank 2006)

Similarly, Suma Chakrabarti, then DFID permanent secretary explained:

Usually, we have a good idea about what needs to be done to achieve poverty reduction, but are much less clear about why it's not happening. All too often, we attribute slow or no progress to lack of political will ... It's this black box of lack of political will that DOC analysis unpacks. This should result in this phrase disappearing from the risk column of a Country Assistance Plan or Regional Assistance Plan (quoted in Thornton and Cox, 2005: 2).

Consequently, design failure prompted the insertion of new forms of political knowledge into the project and policy design, captured in the rise of 'political economy' as a formal analytical tool (Hudson and Leftwich 2014). An OECD review of that early period described how political economy analysis of this kind was considered to be: 'at the cutting edge of development co-operation' (OECD DAC 2005:3). By the late-1990s, many of the large bilateral and multilateral donors were developing formal political economy toolkits to be inserted into project evaluation and design (Hout 2012, Copestake and Williams 2014). USAID's 'Democracy and Governance Assessment' (USAID 2000), the UK Department of International Development (DFID)'s 'Drivers of Change' analysis (Warrener 2004), or the World Bank's Institutional and Governance Reviews (IGR) and the more recent Problem-Driven Governance and Political Economy Analysis (PGPE) - are all tools that emerged to systematise project design with political knowledge. A series of newer initiatives and ideas, such as 'Doing Development Differently' or 'Thinking Politically', signify the next generation of practice that seeks to incorporate political knowledge more integrally.

To summarise, the idea of design failure suggests that development projects are often poorly informed and conceived, have a flawed 'theory of change', and lack awareness of the complexities of the problem at hand. One of the important complexities that has received wide consideration is politics, and it has led to the idea that politics needs to be better

theorised and captured within the conceptualisation of all development interventions. For that reason, design failure analysis has provided the impetus for the transformation in the nature of knowledge about politics, signified in the shift from its dismissal as an unknowable 'political risk' to the commissioning and incorporation of political economy analysis.

4: (HIDDEN) AGENDA FAILURE

Beyond the realm of implementation and design, there is a third and yet deeper version that explains the failure of development in terms of the underlying objectives of its patrons and funders. The central axiom that governs this narrative and drives its analysis is the hierarchical nature of development, and the impossibility of transcending it. Whether in terms of planners versus people, donor versus recipients, or projects versus beneficiaries, the fundamental impulse of the dominant party is to extract benefit from the subservient one. Development is thus the pursuit of those self-interested objectives, while the language and rhetoric of upliftment and selfless generosity euphemise that reality and provide it with the legitimacy to render it acceptable.

The thin version of this critique involves issues such as 'tied aid', or similar cases where commercial or foreign policy objectives diminish development effectiveness. The Pergau dam scandal of the 1990s, and its connection to arms purchases from the UK is one of the most emblematic cases in point (Lankester 2013). As an Oxfam policy report asserts:

The effectiveness of aid is tied closely to why it is given … many donors still attempt to use aid to further their own foreign policy priorities. … Governments need to recognise that attempting to use aid for their own political and economic means … detracts from its potential impact on reducing poverty and inequality (Oxfam 2010: 13-14).

The more substantial, thick version of agenda failure occurs where the patron's self-interested motives take on a much greater role, to the extent that developmental objectives are subsumed or distorted by it. For example, the literature on 'securitisation' has explained how aid and development goals such as poverty are increasingly rationalised and oriented to serve donor country security imperatives related to terrorism or refugees. As Howell and Lind (2009:1280) describe, 'The encapsulation of development into US foreign policy and security strategy has resulted in significant changes in the orientation and emphasis of US development assistance'. Mark Duffield (2001) argues that the militarized humanitarian-development missions that proliferated in the post cold world are part of a global regime innovated and improvised by powerful wealthy countries in order to govern the dangerous, disintegrating periphery.

David Whyte's (2010:134) evaluation on the reconstruction of post-invasion Iraq is also a case in point, and is to be contrasted against the very different diagnosis provided by the US government's audit described earlier:

Systemic fraud and bribery served a useful purpose for the Anglo-American occupation as part of a broader economic strategy designed to provide structural advantages to western firms entering the Iraqi economy. Routine corporate criminality, facilitated by the

government of occupation, was an important means of producing and reproducing (neo)colonial power relations.

There are important differences to note in the cognitive basis and analytical structure of failure in the hidden agenda narrative. Whereas the task of analysing design failure is one of *uncovering* the larger social dynamics, in agenda failure it is often one of *unmasking* a hidden project and the economic/political relations at stake. Rather than viewing dysfunctionality and its causes as an end-point of analysis in itself, this version sees failure as functional, generating 'instrument effects', or else serving as a heuristic device through which it is possible to gain insights into a deeper agenda or pathology not immediately apparent – and to which it may not itself be directly connected. Dysfunctionality is thus not the problem, or even a component of the problem, but perhaps just a vehicle or symptom of it.[5] It is to this genre of failure that dependency theory also belongs: the persistent poverty and distorted development trajectories at the periphery are to be understood in terms of the functional role they play in sustaining the global capitalist system at large, and within it, the prosperity of the advanced capitalist countries. Much the same is the case with the articulation of structural adjustment as a predatory project of neocolonialism or neoliberalism.

The task of actually constructing convincing and well substantiated narratives of hidden agenda failure is intensely demanding, as it requires an evaluation of the development project, an investigation of the underlying political or economic dynamics, and also a deconstruction of the discursive veil. For this reason, it has become particularly suited to anthropologists of development, who have combined ethnographic research and discourse analysis to produce some of the most original and articulate narratives at hand.

For example, the study of 'Bottom of the Pyramid' schemes of micro-entrepreneurship have provided some very revealing new ways of understanding development failure. Drawing on ideas of responsibilization, they have articulated the ways in which projects justified in terms of gender empowerment and poverty alleviation have actually promoted neoliberal subjectivities and a broader political-economic realignment. In Katharine Rankin's (2001:20) account of the making of 'rational economic woman' she argues that:

microcredit must also be recognized as a state strategy that constitutes social citizenship and women's needs in a manner consistent with a neoliberal agenda. As such it illustrates clear connections between state power and gender oppression.

But the hidden effects of development projects are not an innovation of the neoliberal era: they were present in James Ferguson's ethnography of the pre-neoliberal Thaba-Tseka project in Lesotho from the early 1980s. Ferguson's analysis starts with a persuasive account of design failure, caused by a poor understanding of the local economy and livelihood patterns. However, as Tania Li explains, his account did not just stop at asking 'why':

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[5] There is also a similar approach evident in the way that extraordinary moments of rupture and collapse, such as natural disasters or mass panics, serve as a lens through which otherwise obscured political realities are rendered visible (Venugopal 2015, 2017, Guggenheim 2014: 6-7).

We need to go beyond the question posed by Scott - why have certain schemes designed to improve the human condition failed? - to examine the question posed by Ferguson: What do these schemes do? What are their messy, contradictory, multilayered and conjunctural effects? (Li: 2005:384).

Indeed, Ferguson famously uncovered function hidden within dysfunction. Even in failure, the project succeeded by expanding bureaucratic state power in a region hostile to the ruling government. This deeper agenda was not a conscious part of the project design - and its designers were entirely unaware of it. But, explains Ferguson, it was a 'larger unspoken logic that transcends the question of planners' intentions.' Moreover, the depoliticised language of development served to conceal this logic and present it as a technical problem. This is how he famously describes the 'anti-politics' machine, in which political operations are stealthily hidden behind neutral technical authority:

a development project can end up performing extremely sensitive political operations involving the entrenchment and expansion of institutional state power almost invisibly, under cover of a neutral technical mission to which no one can object. (Ferguson 1994: 256)

In understanding the structure of these accounts of development failure, there is an important point to add that is missing in Tania Li's above explanation: Ferguson and the architects of agenda failure do not stop at explaining the effects of development, but invariably manage to find a malign and troubling purpose at work behind the scenes. As David Mosse (2013:230) notes, this literature 'unnecessarily ties insight into pessimism'. Lurking behind the selfless generosity and language of upliftment is shown to be the opposite: the narrow, self-serving extraction of wealth and the assertion of political domination.

It should be clear then that 'the political' thus constructed in this version of failure, and its relationship to the technical-economic core of development is entirely different to the 'political risk' or 'political economy' analysis in the previous two narratives. In the former, the frame was entirely technical, and politics stood outside. In the latter, politics was introduced and analytically integrated into the technical frame. In this third version however, politics, which arises inexorably from the hierarchical nature of the relationships involved, takes over the frame entirely and casts the technicalities aside. The technical economic content of development projects are dismissed here an ephemeral instrument, or a discursive veil. When that veil falls away, it is politics - a self-interested impulse to dominate and exploit - that stands exposed as the resilient social reality. It is in that sense, an argument of the primacy of the political. As Carl Schmitt contends, politics is a fundamental, autonomous social reality, and a distinct explanation of human behaviour that is both irreducible, and also resilient to the liberal model of technocratised containment (Schmitt 2007, Sartori 1989, Mouffe 1999, McCormick 1997).

In summary, this third narrative of failure arises because the underlying goals of the project are problematic, and often diverge from real developmental needs. This approach departs entirely from any presumption about the stated intentions of the development industry, and views its failure as functional and subservient to an underlying, hidden, often predatory

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ambition. Failure is in that sense, not a judgment on any individual development project, but on the futility of the larger enterprise. The hierarchical nature of the relationships are the insurmountable social reality, and it is in this sense that politics is understood and deployed.

5. CONCLUSIONS

This paper has taken the persistent discourse of failure in development as a point of departure to understand what it signifies, how it is structured, and what consequences it bears. That is, it does not intend to explain why development fails, but rather why it is constantly *said* to fail. This task is approached firstly by positing failure as a socially constructed category. With multiple, changing sets of beneficiaries, definitions, goals, and indicators of success, and outcomes that are multi-layered, evolve over time, hard to measure, and generate unpredictable externalities, every successful project can also be reinterpreted as a failure. As Bruno Latour (1996: 35-36 in Mosse 2004:) remarks, 'projects do not fail, they are failed', so that even the formal evaluations of failure are not self-evident, but are representations that must be actively produced and sustained.

Secondly, failure itself is not a stable and self-contained category: the singularity of the term obscures and conflates the many different processes which are given this label. These different versions may be totally unconnected with one another, and even be mutually incompatible. For example, during the 1980s-90s, development was viewed as a failure for very different reasons both by the post-development left, and by the market liberalising right. A different decomposition of failure in this paper provides a three-fold categorisation of the common narratives in circulation, based on implementation, design, and agenda. The differences between these narratives reflect social-occupational positionalities, disciplinary traditions, epistemological approaches, and understandings of the political. Implementation failure is typically a critique of technical-managerial-governance ineptitude. Design failure blames inadequate expert knowledge and a flawed theory of change. The hidden agenda failure speaks of the entrenched hierarchical relationships, and the resilient impulse to dominate and exploit that define the development enterprise.

It should be readily conceded that these are synthetic, idealised categories, and that many narratives do not neatly fit entirely within any one of them. For example, implementation failures can often be ascribed to weak design. Some of the more careful and analytically considered operational reports of World Bank projects, particularly of the early 1990s, elaborate at length on this. That is, the inability to successfully complete projects were found to reflect rushed appraisals, poor technical evaluations, and a failure to build in contingencies for plausible risks into the project design. Similarly, much of the critical academic research on development failure straddles both the design and the agenda critique. Both of these versions seek to bring empirical research and expert knowledge to bear, in order to uncover the hidden politics that causes dysfunctionality. Where they ultimately part ways is in their prognosis about whether the political realities that they reveal subsume development, or whether they can be overcome and made to serve it. Design failures are an optimistic and 'constructive' critique of development: they seek to bring political knowledge to bear in order to improve and enhance design, and to facilitate

project and policy outcomes. The hidden agenda failure on the other hand is pessimistic about this prospect, and implies that social change occurs in the political realm, outside the development frame.

Are these narratives unique to development? What insights are available in other social science literatures? In the world of business and entrepreneurship, where the evaluation of success and failure is far more personalised, and where the role of hierarchy and personal financial motives is more transparent, there are a similar set of divergent failure narratives between owners, managers, and employees (Cardon et al, 2011, Mantere et al, 2013). In large part, this is explained through 'attribution theory' (Martinko et al, 2007), so that individuals construct explanations that attach success to their own actions and attribute failure to factors beyond their control.

More similar and far more relevant to development is the idea of 'wicked problems' (Rittell and Weber 1973). 'Wicked' in this sense does not imply evil, but describes a category of problems in the social sphere that are intractable and complex, unlike the 'tame' problems of the natural sciences, that are bounded, definable, and have a clear solution. Wicked problems are typically found in areas such as public policy, the environment, or conflict resolution. They are extraordinarily complex to understand and resolve and have multiple, mutually contradictory formulations, in which the solution to any one formulation generates irreversible consequences and leads to new problems.

If development is viewed in this way, it provides an opening to understand the perpetual frustration at its inadequacies. That is, development involves the mismatch between the deep complexity of 'little-d' development - the wicked problem at hand - and the inadequate uni-dimensional scientific and managerial analytic modes of 'big-D' development, through which it is frequently mis-diagnosed and burdened with counter-productive interventions.[6] In this encounter, there are no objective 'true-false' outcomes, but only 'good-bad' ones, of which there can be many interpretations. As Rittell and Weber (1973:163) explain:

many parties are equally equipped, interested, and/or entitled to judge the solutions, although none has the power to set formal decision rules to determine correctness. Their judgments are likely to differ widely to accord with their group or personal interests, their special value-sets, and their ideological predilections.

Failure and disappointment is in that sense, pre-determined in the circumstances of this encounter between social complexity and technical rigidity, and it thus invokes the Anna Karenina principle: that there are multiple criteria under which a project can fail, and success is only possible where all such criteria and constituencies have been addressed. Since the criteria are mutually exclusive, it is impossible to meet them all, so that success is impossible, and failure is constantly reproduced.

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[6] A similar understanding is evident in the use of complexity theory in development (Ramalingam 2013) and in framing the idea of resilience (Chandler 2014) as a response to it.

It is perhaps under the weight of this perpetual sense of frustration that Wolfgang Sachs declared development as an obsolete failure in the early 1990s: 'delusion and disappointment, failures and crimes have been the steady companions of development, and they tell a common story: it did not work … development has grown obsolete' (Sachs 1992:1). Sachs is at one level symptomatic of the negativity and pessimism that wicked problems can generate. But he has been proven wrong, in that development has not become obsolete. In fact, the persistent lament that development has failed has not for the most part, threatened this enterprise. On the contrary, it could be said that the narrative of failure has served to reproduce, renew, and sustain development, in the sense that it is success that would make it obsolete. Why is this the case? Is it possible, without lapsing into a conspiracy theory, to ask how the negativity and pessimism about development have productive instrument effects? I conclude by suggesting two possible mechanisms.

Firstly, one can draw on Linsey McGoey's account of 'profitable failure', which examines the reproduction of randomised control trials (RCT) in the pharmaceutical industry. She notes that the failures of RCTs do not lead to a weakening of their authority but to their strengthening, as it leads to demands for more RCTs to provide new evidence. As McGoey (2010:74) says:

If anything, the more useless RCTs are in practice, the more their strength is augmented, as more and more practitioners rally around a call for more RCTs in order to remedy the failings of previous trials.

The development enterprise is constantly under attack, but it has been extraordinarily successful in absorbing and coopting critique, leading to the constant re-invention and accretive growth of both theory and practice. For example, Robert Chambers's (1994) argument that development was a top-down imposition subsequently led to the adoption of participatory methods within mainstream development practice. Indeed, participation became so well integrated that it came to be described the 'new tyranny' (Cooke and Kothari 2001). Similarly, the critique of the social consequences of structural adjustment in the 1980s led eventually to the World Bank's embrace of the poverty agenda in the 1990s, and to the drafting of the Millennium Development Goals. Critique has as such not killed development, but has strengthened it and led to its growth and evolution.

Secondly, the idea that failure can have productive effects recalls Arturo Escobar's (1995) account of the way that representations of poverty 'created' the third world, and brought the development industry into being. Similarly, contemporary representations of development failure play an important role in sustaining the idea of intervening to end it. In the discursive construction of poverty as a global public tragedy, failure is cast on the one hand as a terrible real world condition, and on the other hand, as a moral failure of the world to act decisively to bring this reality to an end. In public campaigns around poverty, debt relief, or humanitarian aid, representations of failure play a critical role in energising the idea of development by generating the impulse to intervene once again to assist the world's poor. The narrative of failure thus becomes productive and sustains the larger enterprise by keeping the wheel of tragedy, intervention, and disappointment spinning.

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