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Lecture by William Easterly, Professor at New York University

THE TYRANNY OF EXPERTS: EASTERLY, AFRICA AND FORGOTTEN RIGHTS

The absence of political and economic rights for the poor of the planet, the cause of their "social immobility", is consistently ignored by economists: take William Easterly's word for it. Professor at New York University and a leader writer for the New York Times, among other publications, Easterly was introduced by Federico Fubini. He underlined how the interests of political and economic elites often coincide, endlessly perpetuating inequality and discrimination. What is more, development aid – especially when managed by technocrats – does not solve the problem. "The rights denied to the poor are first of all political rights", said the economist, concentrating his analysis on Africa and on the right to mobility, but recalling that the technocrats – who are not elected and who therefore do not need to answer to the citizens who are affected by their decisions – also run rampage in the West, one need only look at the case of Greece.-

African farmers are denied even the most elementary rights: to land, safety and mobility. Easterly recounted an episode in Uganda – with farmers evicted from their own land, threatened and subjected to violence, merely because they lived in an area which was the object of sale between Uganda and Britain – as regards which the World Bank undertook to carry out an inquiry. "The inquiry", he said "never took place. For almost 30 years Uganda has been governed by a dictator, who is however an ally of the West, whereas the fate of the poor does not interest anyone".
Easterly retraced the history of Africa from the beginning of the slave trade, initially managed by the Portuguese and then by other European powers, up to the present day. Slave trading was followed by colonialism, which in the British colonies in particular often rested on a form of indirect rule. The local African ruling class was selected by Britain (or was in any case subject to external legitimisation). Naturally this class had no incentive to do anything positive for its people: it was rather intended to serve the interests of the colonial powers, whoever they were. Colonialism was followed by the Cold War. Once again the West, like the USSR, used local dictators (such as Mobutu in Congo/Zaire) to cultivate their own interests. Political and economic elites were created based on western interests, with an economy based on exports. The Cold War was substituted by the so-called "War on Terror". The dictators on whom the West – above all the USA and Britain – could count continued to receive to political, economic and military aid, as in the case of Ethiopia.
When a move was made towards a technocratic approach to development issues, bizarre things started to happen: the technocrats often rediscovered solutions (for problems going from poverty to malaria) that had already been recommended in the colonial era, 70 years ago, demonstrating that this approach does not work, because it ignores the political root of the problems, particularly the denying of fundamental rights, such as the right to mobility (and the corresponding right of small farmers to stay on their own land). Bill Gates has publicly praised the dictator of Ethiopia, Meles Zenawy, who removed farmers from the lands they cultivated to carry out development programmes agreed with international organisations, or to make the land available to foreign purchasers. The history of Ghana has been happier: in 2000 there were the first free elections and since then political freedom has never been placed in discussion. This has also been translated into higher levels of development. So despite everything, there has also been progress in Africa and

increasing numbers of people are fighting for recognition of their rights. So what can we in the West do to help them? Above all ask our governments not to support dictators because they are convenient. -

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