



# BEYOND **Developmentality**

Constructing Inclusive Freedom  
and Sustainability

**Debal Deb**

with foreword by Richard Norgaard

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and Sustainability

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# BEYOND Developmentality

Constructing Inclusive Freedom  
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I dedicate this work to my parents:  
Smt. Jaya Deb and the late Amarendra Krishna Deb,  
and the mentor of my teens:  
the late Susanta Kumar Basu,  
who nurtured in me the desire to eclose from the cocoon of conformity.

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Soon after I returned home from Berkeley, my brother, a social worker, was arrested on fictitious charges. In my battle to save him and his work from the clutches of the district administration, my work on this book halted. A refreshed knowledge about the state's welfare operations made me feel too anguished to finish the book. At this time, emotional support and encouragement from my love Mita, my old pals Kajal and Debashis, and my brother Kunal brought me back to work on the book. My mother's constant care allowed me to disregard many important matters and concentrate on the work. My colleagues Debdulal, Haru, Raju and Swapan shared most of the workload at my research station, thus sparing me enough time in the field. Mere words cannot express my gratitude to them.

I am no expert in many of the topics that I have discussed. Yet I have ventured into this task because obviously, I am not prudent, but also because some of the people I greatly admire encouraged me to brave the challenge. Prof. Asish K Ghosh, Prof. Richard Norgaard, Prof. John Bellamy Foster, Prof. Michael Watts, Dr. Tapas K Ghose, Paolo Roberto Imperiali, Roberto Cerrina, and Steve Walsh are among them. I have extensively drawn on ideas, insights and works of numerous experts in diverse fields. It is impossible to record a comprehensive account of

my intellectual debt to them, most of whom I know only through their writings. Some of them are cited in the text. Numerous people have helped me in shaping my ideas, refining my opinion, revising the draft, polishing the argument, correcting syntaxes and keeping me abreast of current research. A list of all their names will be too long. I must especially mention Celine Dutilly, Dave Rowe, Debashis Biswas, Debashis Sen, Heather Hansen, Martyn Brown, Partha Majumdar, Samantak Das and Tathagata Banerjee, for their most perceptive comments on earlier drafts of the manuscript. Swati Sircar of the University of Washington helped me find solution to a nutty equation, which I have used in a technical discussion on sustainable harvest of a limiting resource. Gregor Weingart of UC-Berkeley emboldened me to use some maths to clarify my points, and refined them, especially my discussion of the harmonic average of per capita income. Martyn and Celine offered point-by-point suggestions to improve style and sharpen my ideas. Mere words of thanks cannot express my gratitude to all these wonderful people, who keep this world inhabitable.

Dr. Vandana Shiva, a great inspiration to many activists and thinkers, inspired me to collate my ideas and work on sustainable agriculture. The outcome was my book *Industrial versus Ecological Agriculture*, published in 2004 by Research Foundation for Science Technology and Ecology, New Delhi. Sections 4.2.2 and 6.5 are excerpted from this book.

A slightly modified version of the contents of Section 7.4 and part of Section 9.4 was published as 'Development against freedom and sustainability' in *Capitalism Nature Socialism* 17(3) (September 2006): 49–70. I owe special thanks to Prof. Joel Kovel for his valuable suggestions that enabled me to explicitly articulate the eco-socialist principles.

A note on the hands behind this publication: Dhruva Narayan of Daanish Books took a courageous decision in 2006 to publish it, and showed remarkable patience to put up with successive phases of up-dating of the text, and all my idiosyncrasies, for two years. In this context, I would like to record my delight as I remember how my amazing e-friend Dr. Oliver Springate-Baginski of the University of East Anglia took a pro-active role to introduce my MS to Rob West of Earthscan, who is kind enough to have readily agreed to co-publish it. I am thankful to Dhruva and Rob for assuring me of the book's value. Finally, I thank all my friends who reinforce my ecological optimism, countervailing all the pessimistic notes that I have written here about our civilization.

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## A View from America

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**E**very culture has a life story explaining the creation of the heavens and the earth; a narrative that positions the mountains, streams, and great oceans; an account of relations between plants and animals and people and gods. Life stories guide individual and collective behaviour, pattern social structures, and inform the ways people transform nature. Historically, there were many cultures and hence many life stories. The stories were always evolving, cross-breeding with other life stories, or dying out with the people they sometimes led astray. Now we have one dominant story – the development story of economic growth without limits, the story of unending happiness from the possession of more and more things. This story is destroying nature, driving greater injustices each day, and threatening the future of humanity. This is the story, now clearly leading us astray, that Debal Deb tackles in this book.

Over the past five hundred years in the West, the Judeo-Christian life story cross-bred with the Western science story it had tried to suppress, putting scientists up with the angels where they could objectively see how the world worked and pull its strings themselves. And they saw and began to manipulate the world as if it were merely a bunch of separate parts organized as a giant machine. As enlightenment reduced the remaining mysteries of nature to simply puzzles yet to be explained, bright and clever philosophers, soon to be known as economists, began to tell people that social organization could be understood in the same way and then expanded and improved upon. The complexities of care people showed for each other were reduced to exchange contracts to maximize individual utility. Material well-being, once bounded by physiological needs, became defined in



terms of new urban necessities and what others had. Markets multiplied and expanded, national boundaries became moot, and communities became defined by economic interests and scientific disciplines rather than by physical association and networks of mutual aid. And as the Western story continued to evolve and spread, it invaded the territories of other stories, conquered them, and promised utopia for all.

Unfortunately, the Western life story evolved around an immature, expurgated, truncated account of the richness of Western science we now have and the complexity of nature it allows us to see. The old mechanical worldview holding out the possibilities of prediction and control and the atomistic assumption that whole problems can be solved in parts became embodied in physical structures, the rationales for institutions, and the canons of public discourse. The idea that people, their values, and their patterns of thinking stand apart from reality; the premise of universality; and the presumption that the separate parts of science would surely fit together still reign, despite all evidence to the contrary. The enlightenment, as it played out over time, allowed a few people to shine very bright lights in a few spots, but the light on the whole grew dimmer, and dimmer for all, until only a few had any vision of the big picture at all. As great life stories go, the West's story promoted dying over becoming, death over being, species by species, culture by culture.

Yet I write in an ephemeral euphoric interlude. After six years of inexplicable mass delusion, of rallying around slogans and lies as if they were beacons of truth, Americans have voted against the theocrats and neocons. Surely it is important to reject leaders with no interest in logic, evidence, or reasoned deliberation let alone accountability. Surely it is good to turn away from those who falsely joined Americans in cultural conflagrations at home and abroad, reduced rights in the name of freedom, attacked social justice in the name of family values, and burdened children with debt. Yet my joy is highly tempered. America's fit of collective insanity was not a stage of economic growth laid out by economist W.W. Rostow half a century ago. For that matter, neither was globalization through capital flows nor climate change in anyone's hopes for humankind in my youth. We are way off course from any vision of where modernity would lead. Some really serious collective thinking, truly moral discourse, pragmatic democratic practice, and visioning are sorely needed.

Without a more serious awakening than we are now experiencing, however, America will simply undo the ineffective reign of Bush II and return to more subtle and sure ways of achieving corporate goals and imperialistic ends. Political debates barely touch on the material needs of the world's poor, the richness of human culture, or the complexities of adapting to a rapidly changing global envi-

ronmental system on which all life depends. Legislators seem little more likely to address the consequences of conflating the meaning of life with ever more material consumption, now so manifest in American obesity and flagging health. How can a society with high rates of illiteracy, let alone scientific illiteracy, suicide, incarceration, mind-altering drug use, and violence toward the weak think of itself as leading the long march of human progress? With America well into the story of economic development, surely the story no longer inspires. Indeed, it is in deep trouble.

Debal Deb documents, in excruciating detail, the contradictions and fallacies of the development story by which Americans live themselves and foist, along with other developed nations, on the rest of the world. Deb helps us see 'developmentality' as a cultural construction, a clearly detrimental one, comparable say to racism, that brings out unsocial, even inhumane outcome while destroying the planet.

We need a new life story. We need an overarching story that respects a diversity of life stories. Living the story of economic development is destroying humanity and nature, us and a good many other species along with us. We need a master life story that puts our hope, compassion, brains, sociality, and diversity to new and constructive ends. Yes, a life story must be a constructed story, and we will have to consciously and conscientiously construct it ourselves. We will have to build it out of the good attributes and aspirations we share. I am not optimistic that we can rally human consciousness and redirect history. But I do harbour hope, a most essential of human traits, which keeps the unlikely, even the extremely unlikely, still in the realm of the possible.

Among good attributes, our ability to empathize with and care for others surely is the most important. We see empathy and care in the behaviour of other species. And we find this endearing because empathy and care are precious to us. To care is surely the most important feeling we have; exercising care the most important thing we do. Care connects us to each other far more tightly than exchange. And yet we live in a world increasingly dominated by an economy driven by self-interest, structured on greed, instead of care. Economic organization has been taking over ever more of our lives. Markets structure the vast majority of moral decisions we make without our even having to think about who is being helped, who is hurt. We have structured our society so that those who care work quietly in the background for modest wages at best. Acts of care are not tallied in the national accounts. Caring for things has supplanted caring for life. Indeed, we kill to defend access to material resources. Care for each other needs to become a central part of our shared life story and of each of our multiple life stories.

Caring for the earth that supports us is surely the second most important line of the new life story we will want to live. When we are close to nature, we sense wonder and feel care, but we have structured our lives so that we are rarely in tune with nature. And even those who work the land must respond to market incentives to survive, and markets are not driven by care for nature. The new life story must put people within the story of all life, not put us above it, closer to being God. Science in the new master life story must be directed toward how we can better fit within nature and achieve happiness rather than how we can redirect nature to our ends as if people could live apart from nature for very long. This brings us to the attribute of intelligence.

Among human attributes, intelligence stands out. Surely our new life stories need to build on this human strength. A few other animals are smart; we should not underestimate the native intelligence of pigs or whales or even their abilities to communicate. However, largely due to opposable thumbs, only humans have technologies with which to see nature better, for communicating across space and time. Only people have libraries and other means to store information. We have mathematical models and simulation techniques to formalize and systemically explore complex relationships. Yet most of what we know comes through breaking things down and understanding their parts. Exercising highly fractured disciplinary understanding has been highly destructive to systems, from our bodies to communities and societies, to nature, and from the local to the global. And this specialized knowledge also serves and has increasingly become captured by special economic interests. Our new life stories must reclaim knowledge for the public interest and help us put it together systemically so that our collective intelligence can sustain the systems on which we depend.

Our sociality is surely a human strength, but it can also be dysfunctional and put to bad ends. We know healthy families and communities exist. Increasingly, we understand both good science and functional democracy as a process of social deliberation and shared judgment. But we also see advertisers exploiting our desires to be in community, or ahead of our peers, through the purchase of the latest new clothing and gadgets. Desiring community, scientists cluster into disciplines and build disciplinary barriers to distinguish themselves from other scientists. Our communal nature can lead to disrespect for people with other beliefs or lifestyles. Our sociality needs to be balanced with respect, openness, pragmatism, and tolerance. Strong walls can be built up between different communities to avoid social conflicts, but then the benefits of diversity are lost. Balancing the human attribute of sociality is going to be difficult, but life stories that acknowledge both the strengths and the dangers of community can keep them in balance.

The Newtonian worldview focuses our attention on efficiency, control, and optimization, narrowing our thinking toward one best possible solution. Western science, however, is less and less about leveraging a mechanical world. Evolutionary theory, thermodynamics, quantum mechanics, cybernetics, game theory, and explorations of chaos among others, even statistics, have changed the way philosophers and scientists understand processes and the possible. Biology is teaching us that diversity is a good thing. Since Darwin, we have begun to see the importance of diversity and resilience in a world whose course is far less predictable or controllable than we see from a Newtonian perspective. Evolutionary options in an uncertain world rely on diversity. Appreciation of human qualities, forms of social organization, and other classes of phenomena requires that there be differences within them. New life stories need to bring back diversity.

Dr. Deb describes how development went so far astray and lays out a path to sustainability with respect for justice, cultural diversity, and nature. He advocates turning away from a fixation on material growth and turning towards human betterment through respect and freedom of choice for all. Clearly the tremendous inequalities we now see between rich and poor are the result of a capitalist system that rewards a few. The differences we see between rich and poor represent inequalities in material access, but they also represent differences in environmental access. They are not differences in our innate abilities to care for each other, to appreciate beauty, and to participate in sustaining nature and human culture. While the rich chase after ever more 'material' freedom, options for true freedom for all – now and in the future – are destroyed. We can turn away from endlessly chasing after material things once our basic needs are met, and truly address what it means to be better humans. Deb advocates an inclusive freedom that extends all of the responsibilities and contradictions of what it means to be free to all people, including future generations.

Deb advocates a major shift in understanding and attitudes, a transformation and assertion of true democracy with inclusive rights, as well as a new economy with new public infrastructure. Major changes are our only hope, given how far off course we really are. With this book, in my judgment, Debal Deb moves into the ranks of critical philosophical practitioners speaking from developing countries – Enrique Leff, José Lutzenberger, Manfred Max-Neef, Vandana Shiva, Victor Toledo and others – whose writings and lives are testaments of sanity, care, and vision.

Richard Norgaard  
University of California, Berkeley.

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