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Development aid confronts politics: the almost revolution, by Thomas Carothers and Diane de Gramont, Washington, DC, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2013, ix + 347 pp., €14.90 (paperback), ISBN 978-0-87003-400-8

In their newest contribution, Thomas Carothers and Diane de Gramont investigate the last decades' *political* turn in giving and conditioning aid. The authors trace how practitioners and politicians in the field have learned to increasingly think and act politically, accepting the notion that development in all sectors is an inherently political process. "Being political" or "working politically" means here the "*efforts by development aid actors intentionally and openly to think and act politically for the purpose of making aid more effective in fostering development*" (10, italics in the original). In the reading of Carothers and de Gramont, this new politics agenda includes two halves: the pursuit of political goals (for example, better governance, democratic governance, or democracy itself), and the use of politically smart methods (for example, political aid for relevant actors inside and outside the government and strategic insertion of aid in local processes of change instead of proper technical aid). Based on expert interviews and the analysis of policy documents, Carothers and de Gramont examine how both halves might reinforce, but also how they might hinder each other. External and internal obstacles, such as a heightened sensitivity on the part of many aid-receiving governments about foreign political interventionism, inflexible aid delivery mechanisms, and entrenched technocratic preferences within many aid organizations, challenge effective aid spending. Carothers and de Gramont welcome the observed political turn as a valuable trend, but also warn about problems and challenges involved in more political approaches.

The analysis proceeds in three parts. In the first section (Chapter 2), the authors critically summarize the origins of the apolitical cast of modern development assistance in the 1960s to the 1980s. Section two (Chapters 3–5) is dedicated to the breaking of the political taboo during the 1990s to the 2000s, taking into consideration the changes of the overall geostrategic context, of the international consensus on what development is and how it occurs, of the pace of economic life, and of external actors' opportunities to work across borders. The third section (Chapters 6–8) observes the most recent challenges, including the slow-down of the political turn, the dispute on whether democratic governance generates better socio-economic outcomes, and the resistance towards ongoing efforts of some aid organizations to integrate political goals and smart methods into traditional socio-economic areas such as health, education, and agriculture. Chapter 9 concludes and suggests ideas for how aid providers could move forward.

The book provides interesting observations on the effects of the political turn in development aid, highlighting key challenges and problematic trends. The former include the downplay of the value of democratic governance on the expense of socio-economic development (260–262), the lack of aid methods guaranteeing success (262–264), and the political unassertiveness of aid providers (264–

265). The latter comprise an overemphasis of local ownership that impedes democratic governance if authoritarian governments are unwilling to democratize (269–270), and the pressure on aid organizations to do “more [aid outcome] with less [resources]” although a political approach would require just the opposite (270–272). The requirement to define, monitor, and assess results more precisely risks limiting the aid providers’ flexibility in the field in being fixated upon “results management” (272–273). Considering these challenges and trends, Carothers and de Gramont are completely right in concluding that the political revolution is not yet complete.

However, the major merit of this contribution is also its greatest shortcoming: it is a book written by and for policy practitioners. Unfortunately, this comes at the expense of scientific accurateness and differentiation. The book sums up the macro trends in aid spending over the last five decades in a generalized way; but it is not a carefully designed theory-led comparative study systematically tracing the strengths and weaknesses of the so-called political turn over different well-selected cases (for example, countries or policy fields). The book claims to focus on donor politics, seeking to look inside donor organizations, albeit without systematically discriminating between multilateral and bilateral governmental and non-governmental aid givers and their specific policy cycles. Instead, the arguments are *grosso modo* made about the “aid providers”, the “mainstream aid community” or “Western governments”, as if these actors would act unitarily or as if there would exist a general consensus on the political character of aid among key aid donors. The study tends to overlook dynamics and constraints on the receiving end of aid. Here, the newer literature on the stability of hybrid and autocratic regimes would offer complementary information that needs to be taken into account when analysing the (in!)effectiveness of aid spending in authoritarian contexts. Finally, the quintessence of the suggestions for the way forward (276–283) is very short and somehow disappointing. Given that two very distinguished experts on development aid and democracy promotion are at work, one would expect more detailed, even controversial, suggestions that might incite a lively debate among aid providers about how to render the necessary political turn in aid spending more effective.

All in, *Development Aid Confronts Politics* is a valuable first assessment of the political turn, informative for policy experts and students of foreign aid and democratization. For academic scholars, more remains to be done to understand the dynamics and pitfalls of external actors’ political engagement in domestic political affairs and the processes of strategic interaction and bargaining between specific aid providers and aid receivers.

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