**BOOK REVIEW**

**Global Development Ethics: a Critique of Global Capitalism***,* Eddy M. Souffrant, 2019, Rowman & Littlefield, Lanham MD, 272pp., £34 paperback, ISBN: 978-1786604699

When I hear the phrase ‘global development’, I invariably wonder global development for whom?[[1]](#footnote-1) My critical curiosity and decolonial sensibilities lead me to ask whose perspectives are being solicited in a particular global development effort? What power differentials are in play? What unintended consequences might be unfolding? Embedded in my concern is my concern for those whose voices, perspectives, and knowledges are notbeing solicited in development efforts. I had all this in mind as I read Eddy Souffrant's *Global Development Ethics: A Critique of Global Capitalism* (2019). I am pleased that he creates ample space for his readers to critically (re)consider global development *for whom*?

In what follows, I use the term ‘Western/Global North’ as a bridge between the geographically inaccurate ‘Western’ – which ignores entire continents, but is still often used by many living in the so-called ‘West’ – and the more accurate geographical descriptor ‘Global North’ (*cf.* Dussel, 2003a).

I am not a Global Development Ethics scholar, in so far as the capitalized term may denote thinkers, texts, and issues within a sub-field of professional Western/Global North (WGN) philosophy. I am unfamiliar with many of the players, and with common framings of issues. On the other hand, notbeing a global development ethics scholar in a sub-field sense is also a strength. As a philosophy scholar, I am deeply influenced by the classical American pragmatism tradition, with specialization in the thought of Charles Sanders Peirce (Trout, 2010). In addition, my research is informed by my study of epistemologies of ignorance and liberatory epistemologies more generally, as well as my study of thinkers – such as Enrique Dussel (2013b) and María Lugones (2003, 2007) - who critique the Western/Global North colonialism project with an uncompromising insistence on keeping its horrors at the forefront of consideration and on calling out WGN theoretical erasures or minimization of these horrors. These interweaving strands of philosophical critique inform my approach to global development ethics.

When I read Souffrant’s *Global Development Ethics: a Critique of Global Capitalism*, I was encouraged by his insistence that a global development ethics should resist normative analyses that are agent-dependent in the assessment of responsibility: ‘if no agents are identified as the source or instigator of an action or condition, the responsibilities that ensue are deemed supererogatory, charitable, or inexistent’ (Souffrant, 2019, pp.156-57). He focuses on disasters impacting humans in order to highlight the paucity of this kind of agent-dependent normative analysis: ‘[W]e have witnessed even if from afar disasters of all sorts around the globe from the Caribbean and Asia (earthquakes and tsunamis), to South and North America (earthquakes, fires, and hurricanes), to Australia (bushfires) and other parts of the world (Souffrant, 2019, p.1). He then conducts a close analysis of the devastating 2010 earthquake in Haiti (pp.3-14), arguing for ‘a reconsideration of the disaster in Haiti and the responsibility that it entails’ (p.9). More specifically, Souffrant proposes a collective responsibility that is distinct from "the shame or the self-congratulatory posture that is associated with charity in a capitalist environment’ (p.13). And he calls out an isolationist myth that is common in the WGN:

I maintain ... that in the current global environment, the presumed isolation that nurtures the notions of poor and rich countries or presumes that communities are cordoned off from each other is a myth, one that produces nefarious consequences. The wealth of groups or nations derive [*sic*] from their interconnectedness with other groups and nations across the globe. When we reject the myth, we make room for collective and sororal responsibilities that do not require begging but instead refer to a recognition of the rights, the moral rights of all … (pp.13-14)

It is important to pause in consideration of Souffrant's point that ‘The wealth of groups or nations derive [*sic*] from their interconnectedness with other groups and nations across the globe’, a powerful implicit reference to the history and present manifestations of WGN colonialism, which in addition to genocide, involved wealth extractionand theft of land, resources, and human labor, the last involving the barbarities of the trans-Atlantic slave trade. I also applaud Souffrant for his direct causal agency in the context of global development ethics analyses and for identifying the isolationist myth, both of which can inform oversimplified ethical analyses that let structural racism, colonialism, and capitalism off the hook.

Souffrant creates space for doing global development ethics against the grain of traditional WGN Cartesian ontology, which is often deeply embedded in WGN philosophy:

Development work, whether local or global, is engaged work. It requires a consideration of the various elements of the social ontology of relations (identity, morality, justice, ecology) .... If our being is social as I have argued, social conditions that risk to demean or undermine us, go counter to the sustenance of our individuality and survival. These conditions in turn create responsibilities and have to be attended to. The responsibility is to alleviate or eliminate such conditions and find ways to strengthen human viability. (p.40)

I completely agree with Souffrant’s critiquing of Cartesian ontology, as well as proposing a social ontology. The individualism that Cartesian ontology promotes is untenable. While Souffrant argues as much, he might have gone further to include the insights latent in the fact that the human baby cannot survive infancy without the nurture of caretakers and community, who not only sustain the baby’s life, but also teach the baby language and countless other communal habits and norms (Dewey, 1988; Peirce, 1984; Peirce, 1986; Trout, 2010). Engaging this richer context helps shed light on the survival thematic that all humans navigate. Humans are embodied organisms who will die if their survival needs are not met. And human communities often survive by drawing on communal knowledge passed down through the generations. This communal knowledge is shaped by social lived experience within natural settings that exhibit particular climate cycles, flora, fauna, and other rhythms that exhibit the uniqueness of human communities interacting with the natural environment that includes and surrounds them. These connections resonate with both Souffrant's insistence on including the voices of local indigenous peoples in the consideration of development projects and his focus on human viability.

Souffrant’s calls for the inclusion of the voices of local indigenous peoples in projects to address disaster response. In calling for this inclusion, he engages in an epistemological shift to embrace these perspectives, which are so often not even considered in the first place, or are considered, but dismissed or minimized (see Lorde, 1984; Lugones, 2003). Drawing on Arturo Escobar’s work, Souffrant notes:

Although Escobar’s critique is from the perspective of his discipline of anthropology, it resonates well with other disciplines to point to prospective tools for dismantling hegemonic development regimes or doctrines. … The deconstruction should consist of collective actions of the indigenous and development workers, who are motivated by a strong principle of collective responsibility that helps redefine life, economy, nature, and society in the territories targeted by development projects. It is worth noting that such collective actions are in the main cultural struggles purposed to challenge the hegemony of Western thought. (p.210)

Souffrant resists taking the meaning of development for granted. Taking this term for granted is common in WGN contexts, where development is often infused with capitalist assumptions that leave out the lived experience and wisdom of local indigenous peoples (Shiva, 2002, 2010). Souffrant creates space for his readers to explore the question, global development for whom? One key criterion of this question is Souffrant's insistence on promoting human viability. At the end of Chapter Seven he notes, ‘Global development ethics is thus first the recognition of universal needs unmet and second, the practice of alleviating such needs for the purpose of nurturing and facilitating the exhibition of human creativity that is consistent with an expansive humanity’ (p.201). Promoting human viability goes hand in hand with Souffrant's insistence on incorporating the voices of local indigenous peoples, whose lived experience-based knowledge enables them to anticipate context-specific threats or opportunities to promote human viability. Souffrant might actually have made a stronger epistemological commitment to the expertise of indigenous peoples with his suggestion of shifting the presumption of expertise and his assertion in that the wisdom of the indigenous be recaptured (Wildcat, 2009). Elsewhere in the book, he seems to reserve the terms ‘expert’ and ‘expertise’ for those who come to a local context from the outside in order to help a community that has experienced a disaster (e.g., pp.160, 254).

Souffrant offers African philosophy as a model for development work. He also draws on transnational feminism to challenge the assumption that the WGN and/or the United States be the assumed relational counterpoint for work in global development ethics. Moreover, he notes the importance that philosophy scholars be vigilant in order to avoid perpetuating the structures of power it has sought to change. This is an extremely important caution, a call for humility. It is all too easy for WGN-trained philosophers inadvertently to occupy what María Lugones calls an ‘arrogant gaze’, which – in the context of global issues – often neglects to considerthe very factors that are most important (Lugones, 2003, 2007).

I think a discussion of disaster relief must explicitly and thoroughly consider and embed the climate crisis, especially within a critique of global capitalism. I am disappointed that Souffrant does not robustly integrate climate change or the climate crisis into his discussion of global development issues. Unless I am mistaken, the word ‘climate‘ does not appear in the book, nor do the terms ‘carbon’ and ‘warming’. Souffrant uses disasters of all sorts around the globe as the touchstone of his project: ‘My thinking of a global development ethics will consist of a series of reflections on the role of ethics in helping us face such conditions’ (p.2). And where I would have expected a straightforward integration of the climate crisis, he clarifies his focus without acknowledging the elephant in the room:

My concern will be of [*sic*] only a portion of environmental disasters, and even then on chronic conditions that are environmental in a larger sense than that strictly related to the physical environment. I shall allude more specifically to conditions of poverty, chronic illnesses, and many other events or conditions that affect human viability but are unforeseen, and appear to be unconnected, or unmediated by identifiable causal connections with a human agency (p.2).

Would that Souffrant had been, at the very least, explicit about his avoidance of engaging with the climate crisis, and forthright about the limitations that this avoidance would introduce in his analyses. Engaging with the climate crisis would have helped Souffrant buttress his points about the deficiency - for a global development ethics - of causal analyses that require a specific causal agent in order to assign responsibility. He could, for example, have noted how the increased number and intensity of climate change-intensified natural disasters cannot be adequately addressed by a linear concept of causality that lets implicated countries and corporations side-step their responsibilities (pp.149-62). These disasters often disproportionally affect those in non-dominant groups across the globe, a point which is deeply relevant to Souffrant's efforts to honor their voices. Finally, given that capitalism is implicated in the climate crisis, his global critique of capitalism should have addressed this threat to the very survival of humanity (Klein, 2014). Souffrant does mention the hurricane which ravaged Haiti in October, 2016 and he highlights "the aftermath of the 2017 hurricane season that devastated many Caribbean islands, including Puerto Rico" (p.254). Yet, there is no appreciation that these storms are part of a climate crisis fueled by more, and more intense, hurricanes.

Vandana Shiva's provides resources for addressing the climate crisis in the context of global development ethics. Souffrant references *Water Wars: Privatization, Pollution, and Profit* (Shiva, 2002), in a brief footnote, as an ‘example of the commodification of the environment and its extraction from common resource to private hands’ (p.159, fn.17). Shiva (2002) is replete with philosophical analyses that challenge conventional WGN economic/capitalist assumptions. Shiva's analyses are integrated with alternative epistemological insights, she features the wisdom of local indigenous people, and gives examples of local indigenous resistance to development projects that threaten their very sustenance.

The impact of climate crisis on all forms of life is mediated through water in the form of floods, cyclones, heat waves, and droughts. Water fury can be tamed only if the atmospheric saturation by carbon dioxide is contained. While subverting international struggle to avert climate disaster makes economic sense for oil companies, it spells political and ecological disaster for much of the earth's community. More than anything, the oil economy's environmental externalities, such as atmospheric pollution and climate change, will determine the future of water, and through water, the future of all life. (Shiva, 2002, p.40)

I am puzzled that Souffrant’s critique of global capitalism is so muted. I appreciate that there is a clear ethical tension here between the ideal and the real. I also acknowledge that there may be cues I am missing. I am, however, unsatisfied with Souffrant's engagement with the morality of capitalism, and unconvinced by his position that capitalism is either moral or morally neutral (p.193). Making this case must, I argue, include an unequivocal and thorough acknowledgement of past WGN colonial atrocities.

To ensure that capitalism’s past and present impacts are not erased or minimized, however unintentionally, discussions of its morality must not be separated (even within the same book) from the past and present exploitation of human beings and the natural world. Souffrant links a ‘thriving capitalism’ to corporations, yet lacks a critique of their legal underpinnings and the monumental harms they often perpetuate (see Bakan, 2004, 2015). For his global development ethics to gain genuine traction in its application, it must fully contend with the grave moral failings - past and present - of capitalism and of (some) corporations.

Souffrant’s critique of Cartesian ontology mighty have been enhanced by reference to the piece by Charles Mills (1998). Souffrant could have highlighted the significance of the deeply problematic social ontology Mills identifies and explains in the context of WGN racism and colonialism. This troubling social ontology, which Mills treats more comprehensively in his book *The Racial Contract* (1997),is often not acknowledged in WGN philosophy. Mills explains how, on the one hand, propertied, economically, and politically powerful men of European descent deemed themselves white and therefore superior and worthy of full ethical personhood. On the other hand, these powerful white men deemed those not considered white as inferior, as sub-personsunworthy of full (or any) ethical dignity. This social ontology was enacted with extreme and protracted violenceby those with the political power to implement their ontological beliefs by means of genocide, land and resource theft, treaty violations, and the trans-Atlantic slave trade (Mills, 1997).

Had Souffrant utilized Mills’ work more fully in his own global development ethics, it would have lent a sharper conceptual and practical edge both to ‘dismantling hegemonic development regimes or doctrines’ and to the work of creating space for local indigenous voices, which are so often left out of consideration in the first place (p.210). This is to say that Mills' work critically informs the global development for whom question by inspiring extra caution in the application of a global development ethics. This caution involves efforts to avoid and interrupt residual colonial sub-personhood patterns, patterns that involve the exclusion of the perspectives, participation, and wisdom of local indigenous peoples (and others in non-dominant groups) in approving, designing and implementing particular development projects.

If Souffrant must resort to John Locke and Immanuel Kant, he must alsocall out the arrogant WGN gaze embedded in each of these thinker's works (see Farr, 1986; Eze, 1995; Mills, 2014). Locke wrote about private property and the importance of individual freedom at the same time as he himself invested in the trans-Atlantic slave trade. Thus, Locke was enacting a social ontology that involved the freedom of some white people to enslave other human beings. Eze’s study of Immanuel Kant (1995) reveals an analogously troubling concept of humanity as only fully referring to white European men (Spencer, 2019). Locke and Kant are, unfortunately, role modelsfor cleaving humanity into persons and sub-persons. These disconnects between theory and practice must be called out very explicitly, as well astraced in their theoretical and practical implications. Otherwise, these same disconnects can undermine the genuine application of a global development ethics that values the lives of all humans. A global development ethics must explicitly and uncompromisingly grapple with capitalism’s practicalfoundation in the WGN, a foundation involving an imposed ontological cleavage manifested in enslavement, genocide, and land and resource theft. These patterns continue today.

Vandana Shiva documents many of these current patterns and makes important contributions to the concepts of both development and poverty. Shiva (2010, pp.1-13) insists that the conventional understanding of development in Western economic contexts is rooted in a colonial mindset that sees natural resources as sources of profit and ‘progress’. This same Western mindset makes problematic and life-undermining assumptions about the local indigenous peoples, whose input is not solicited. Shiva highlights Western assumptions that local indigenous peoples are living in poverty, when they were actually practicing subsistence living, drawing on the natural resources that the capitalist gaze insists on bringing into the market through extraction and commodification. Highlighting how real material poverty or misery can be the result of such projects, Shiva explains the cruel irony:

This cultural perception of prudent subsistence living as poverty has provided the legitimisation for the development process as a poverty removal project. As a culturally biased project it destroys wholesome and sustainable lifestyles and creates real material poverty, or misery, by the denial of survival needs themselves, through the diversion of resources to resource intensive commodity production. Cash crop production and food processing take land and water resources away from sustenance needs, and exclude increasingly large numbers of people from their entitlements to food. (p.10)

Shiva's discussion of development resonates with Souffrant's critical contributions to the global development for whom question. When development is conceptualized, however inadvertently, through a WGN gaze, those whose perspectives have been omitted may be targeted by developmental projects that undermine, rather than contribute to, their survival and flourishing (pp.183-6).

As I conclude this book review in January of 2021, I am compelled to acknowledge the devastating coronavirus pandemic with which humanity is grappling. It is fitting to note that Souffrant cautions against a political attitude that presumes that only those in other parts of the world need development assistance, that their problems are not our problems (p.175). Urging foresight informed by the reality of human interconnectedness, he presciently observes that ‘it may be an epidemic again … the virus, whether it be HIV, cholera, or Ebola, may travel to us because of our interconnections’. And he stresses the need ‘to shift or adopt new metaphors to deal with the circumstances and to accept an interconnection, lest we deal with the encroaching crises haphazardly’ (p.175). I am struck by the incisive wisdom of these words. He continues:

The threat perceived to the way of life of a portion of the global community thus reveals the interconnectedness of all the members of the global community. As the connection is strengthened by the advocacy and implementation of preventative measures, it sheds light on the common bond between the different communities. (p.175)

This powerful passage speaks for itself. I close with a word about hope, described by Peirce as ‘sentiment ... demanded by logic’, that serves human survival (see Trout, 2010). Applied to the current pandemic, the multifold actions that individuals and communities are taking to survive manifest the hope that our efforts will succeed. This kind of hope, hope grounded in concrete action, is also grounded in the deep critiques that Souffrant offers in *Global Development Ethics: a Critique of Global Capitalism.*

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1. In what follows, I borrow from and expand on comments I prepared for an author meets critics session on Eddy Souffrant's *Global Development Ethics: a Critique of Global Capitalism,* hosted by the Society for Philosophy in the Contemporary World at the American Philosophical Association's Pacific Division Meeting in 2019. My thanks to Simon Aihiokhai (2017) for discussing this material with me. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)