

They Don't *Not* Want Babies: Globalizing Philosophy of Education and the Social Imaginary of International Development

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In our interconnected world there is much one can learn from studying events beyond national borders. To this end, philosophers of education examine educational policies and practices from afar, typically applying their own frameworks to international cases, or altering them in light of interesting international events.¹ However, this work has so far been sporadic and unsystematic, particularly in the United States. As Kathy Hytten writes, “[W]hile some educational philosophers have been writing about globalization, it has not significantly affected how we think about our larger purposes or our field of study.”² The engagement of U.S. policy-makers with international educational phenomena is similarly shallow, revealing a general lack of interest in the potential of learning from others globally.³

In this essay I consider how philosophy of education can engage with global studies of education to productively problematize practices and frameworks in international aid and development. By global studies of education, I refer to investigations into how educational policies reflect “a particular configuration of values whose authority is allocated at the intersection of global, national and local processes.”⁴ Yet while global studies in education frequently center on policy processes, a globalized philosophy of education can elucidate and analyze intersections of educational values, attitudes, and beliefs within multilayered political contexts which interact and may contradict each other, and can result in inconsistent practices. I elaborate this view by exploring how international aid organizations rely upon a deficiency model and social imaginary of development and education that precludes the praxis-ideal many volunteers and philanthropists value. The development imaginary fails to recognize cultures as *a priori* relational and intersecting, and denies agency of the other, resulting in failure for many well-intentioned projects.

As Hytten notes, many philosophers of education devote themselves to elaborating concepts (such as democracy) in varied contexts, and their “rich conceptions provide us with resources that speak to our current era”: an era of heightened awareness of challenges at our doorstep, and of our interconnectedness to others worldwide. Here I concur with Hytten that educational philosophers should rise to challenges posed by interconnectedness. But while Hytten focuses on cultivating a compassionate global orientation in the classroom, I consider those who recognize interconnectedness, and want to “do something,” but find themselves trying to “fix problems” rather than working toward praxis. International aid work should be understood as a cross-cultural or intercultural process, where cultures intersect, and values are continually developed and refined by individuals, communities, and larger organizations. I favor here a dialectical approach to international engagement that “conceives cultural formations as ... interconnected and interdependent,”⁵ problematizing the use of the deficiency model of development today.

WOMEN'S LIVES AND CONDOMS ON BANANAS

Melinda Gates ignited international controversy last summer by sharing her goal to provide millions of women, mostly in Africa, with injectable contraception. Gates relies on statistics on maternal and infant mortality alongside the voices of African women in making her case. She cites research claiming that African women are dying frequently due to lack of family planning. The statistical account is then driven home by exclamations that, "We have 100,000 women who didn't want to get pregnant who die in childbirth. We have 600,000 babies, where mothers say they didn't intend to get pregnant and their child dies — every single year!"⁶ Various African religious leaders, as well as the Pope, have countered that using contraception goes against their commitments to their faiths, however. Others depict the project as one of a new postcolonial eugenics. "African babies are not the threat,"⁷ a Cameroonian writes, while others question Gates's focus on "pesky African fertility," given numerous challenges many in Africa face.⁸

The media debate on this issue obscures an important measure of the project, however: its likelihood to *work*. Missing from most accounts are past instances in Africa where contraception has been (and is being) freely provided, by the Gates among others.⁹ Thus Gates has gathered and will spend some \$5 billion to provide contraception in Africa in the future, but the Gates Foundation has done this before and, apparently, it already did not work. Gates stated in 2006 that condoms were not making a major impact on HIV/AIDS in Africa because of stigma, "cruel" and "irrational."¹⁰ No mention of this background is made by Gates or mainstream journalists in relation to this new project. No one has asked here whether stigma is likely to be associated with injectable contraception.

Such a question concerning the potential effectiveness of the project challenges the assumption of deficiency undergirding most development missions. According to the deficiency model of development, people suffer because they lack things, and often knowledge of why or how to use them, when compared with others. It is straightforward within this view to provide the missing things when plausible. Education becomes part of the solution, by filling the gap regarding how and why contraception, for example, is useful. This deficiency model is part of a larger social imaginary of development, a schema for understanding the social world,¹¹ which holds that some societies have developed further than others. Some stayed "backwards," while others advanced: global haves and have-nots. A social imaginary is fueled more by broad belief than theoretical justification, and is "the way ordinary people 'imagine' their social surroundings"¹² — a "background" to action and decision-making rather than a rigorously conceived topic of research or theory.

As a creative force this broad imaginary has fueled a variety of projects and programs, many of which seem aligned with a compassionate, optimistic stance to global interconnection. Its deficiency model makes sense at first glance, especially when considering unequally distributed goods that are obviously essential, like water or food. Yet the model and imaginary facilitate messy affairs in reality, as even water and food practices are shaped by social context. Different communities sanction different diets; the benefits of drinking water which is icy or comes from

a tap are not commonly understood worldwide. Here, then, emerges an intersection of assumptions about how water is good or bad to drink, in place of a simple gift. A more complicated disposition becomes required about water, about “who knows best” about water, which is a much less complex case than that of many other goods, like literacy, democracy, or family planning.

The deficiency model and development imaginary undergird the work of the Peace Corps, the U.S. international aid organization, and one of the largest and best known. The Peace Corps aims explicitly to build capabilities in disadvantaged areas in line with nations’ own priorities. Implicitly it also works to promote the United States internationally, through its official presence in a country, and the good intentions of the volunteers. Today over 4,000 Peace Corps Volunteers (PCVs) are serving twenty-seven-month contracts in Africa (among other places). More than half are involved significantly with family planning, including youth clubs, health-teacher or health-practitioner training, and related activities.¹³ They put condoms on bananas before African audiences, hand out condoms, and advise where people can get more.

I was one of these volunteers a few years back. I found Paulo Freire is particularly beloved by many PCVs, for his view that a community must decide dialogically what matters to it for education-as-praxis to commence. As Freire writes, “this view of education starts with the conviction that it cannot present its own programme but must search for this programme dialogically with the people.”¹⁴ Volunteers self-organize to study *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* in their time outside of formal Peace Corps training, which also focuses in part on how to facilitate open, dialogic “community needs assessments.”

What PCVs commonly discover at their permanent work sites, however, is that dialogue for praxis is difficult, even when both parties apparently intend to engage. In a recent article Returned PCV Maya Lau recalls how she “had lengthy, optimistic conversations with a village chief about starting a community garden only to discover that I misread his reaction and that he was, in fact, against the whole endeavor.”¹⁵ The Peace Corps tries to prepare volunteers for this common experience, with trainings on cross-cultural communication challenges, on being an outsider, and so on. However, it still can be surprising, after months (and sometimes years) of cultural and language training, to discover one still lacks basic cultural scripts, of passive aggression, desire for the gringo to “save face,” and the like.

The problem is not only about language and communication norms, but also relates to interpretation in the context of one’s own assumptions, which can include assumptions of deficiency. Often it involves not just *not hearing* but also *not asking* effectively. David Ross Patient, a leading African HIV/AIDS activist, has found in his work that responses are often prescribed by questions: “If you communicate, then the response (or lack thereof) is simply a reflection of your communication. If you communicate differently, you will get different results. Examine their map of the world again.”¹⁶ Relatedly, Freire writes, “The investigation of what I have termed the people’s ‘thematic universe’ — the complex of their ‘generative themes’ —

inaugurates the dialogue of education as the practice of freedom."¹⁷ One is likely to hear what one wants to hear, failing to actively seek out aspects of the situation that contradict one's known or unknown hunches.

Thus, Gates met many African women who told her they did not intend to have their babies — that they would never have had any babies if they had access to the birth control she would introduce. Lau heard her village chief state her garden idea was great. But these responses do not necessarily reveal enough of the schemas of the intended aid recipients. The women and the chief were not lying, exaggerating, or engaging in deception; their assent may more accurately reflect their experiencing, as all do, internal conflict among priorities, goals, hopes, and desires. To understand another's priorities in life in their practical implications is difficult in the best of circumstances.

And these examples are far from best cases. In these instances, an asymmetry is established by the development organization's assumption of deficiency. A power imbalance emerges with the imaginary of development that cannot be obscured or precluded through learning a language or leaving the designer clothes at home. Many PCVs relate personally to Freire's call to praxis within challenging power relations, and view their service as an act of cross-cultural exchange, not deficiency. However, Freire is used differently by the Peace Corps organization. The idea that partners come together to construct aims of education or another mission, rather than prescribe them from outside, does not merely facilitate praxis, but it also promotes "buy-in." Buy-in is valuable to organizations for project sustainability; without buy-in, the new library or science lab is abandoned once the PCV departs, because no one else really wanted it. Peace Corps measures its effectiveness by buy-in, requiring that volunteers not complete projects themselves, but merely facilitate. The call for praxis thus aims to unite two interests here: those of a community and those of an aid organization. In a Foucauldian sense, buy-in fuels both thoughtful service and outcomes-based development work.

Lacking praxis, that hard-to-reach ideal, the volunteer faces competing interests. In this context, he or she is stymied by the schizophrenic call to interact with a community authentically, to support an outcomes-oriented organization ("show me the garden"), and by skepticism from the subjects of aid about his or her intentions.¹⁸ Everyone involved senses the development imaginary at work; a PCV-initiated garden is not just a garden, but represents acquiescence to the imaginary. In asking a community to consider a garden, the PCV paradoxically asks it to buy in to (and accept) its own deficiency, its own lacking: to not just accept, but to act on the acceptance, that the PCV knows best, and a garden would make their lives better. Community participants are reasonably suspicious here of the implication of community deficiency in the PCV's actions, as Maria Lugonés and Elizabeth Spelman express: "We couldn't want you to come into our worlds 'out of obligation' ... Out of obligation you should stay out of our way ... forego the use of whatever power you have over us ... to overwhelm us with your education ... engrain in us a sense that we are members of dying cultures and are doomed to assimilate."¹⁹

The Peace Corps works to align different interests by requiring communities to apply for volunteers, defining their own deficiencies, which can then inform volunteer placements. Yet this process can be so ineffective that it sometimes resembles the Peace Corps simply getting permission to enter communities, to use every healthy U.S. citizen who applies to volunteer. PCVs are sometimes told upon arrival the community “just wanted an American around”: “Shelbyville had a German, so we got an American.” After being thusly requested, many volunteers meet with resistance by those with indigenous pride. After studying Setswana full-time for 3 months, many volunteers in Botswana and northwest South Africa find no *Motswana* (person) in their community will speak with them in Setswana, or even acknowledge hearing their greetings ... for two years. Some see the volunteer as a threat, claiming to want to share culture, while obsessed with what their community lacks.

What about the women who told Gates they did not intend to have their children, and did not want any more? In a recent interview, Gates stated she considers this new project “her lifetime’s work.”²⁰ She has collected \$5 billion to provide contraception to women who have expressed interest in it, which is impressive. And she speaks more of Africans’ needs than her career trajectory. Yet it is possible that the women Gates met helped make her case for philanthropy, as much as she served them by discovering they want what she would like to give. According to Freire, in revolutionary acts the interests of the oppressed and oppressors become aligned, but it is only after soul searching, community study, and the development of trust that such is possible. He discusses, in this context, the need for the oppressed to shake off false consciousness, and see their place in the world as it is. But doing so is difficult:

Self-deprecation is ... characteristic of the oppressed, which derives from their internalization of the opinion the oppressors hold of them. So often do they hear that they are good for nothing, know nothing, and are incapable of learning anything — that they are sick, lazy, and unproductive — that in the end they become convinced of their own unfitness.²¹

Gates’s African associates may not be “convinced of their own unfitness,” but they may view self-deprecation as a kind of polite, possibly disinterested, tolerance of the development imaginary and its effects: as a strategy balancing acquiescence with resistance. Few people in disadvantaged African communities explicitly decline things freely given, or tell outsiders they do not want anything on offer, though many volunteers observe they do not always *do* what foreigners say. Disadvantaged people in Africa are often averse to the idea of publically upsetting a rich or influential foreigner, while agreement may be widespread in a community that it is not lacking for everything the global elite has to offer. Agreeableness and self-deprecation in general are also less valued in U.S. society than in rural Africa, and are thus difficult for many aid workers to even detect and understand amidst other subtle, indirect forms of communication.²² I posit the women Gates talked to wanted to be agreeable, for the favor or appeasement of a resourceful outsider. Similarly, a village chief may submit to a young U.S. woman who wants to discuss everything missing from his home. But that does not mean he welcomes her action.

CONFRONTING HIV/AIDS

Assumptions of deficiency and uneven, isolated cultural development embedded in the development imaginary also limit efforts to effectively confront HIV/AIDS in southern Africa, by emphasizing gifts rather than mutual understanding. When used effectively, condoms prevent HIV/AIDS. According to the model development philosophy, then, people who do not know this or do not use them should be told, and given condoms. PCVs put condoms on bananas, hand them out, and explain where people can get more. They facilitate clubs to encourage personal responsibility and choice. Rates of infection decrease dramatically with such strategies in East Asia (especially where HIV is spread by prostitution), and the West, so many see this as an opened and closed case.

In Africa this education has not worked as intended, however. Certainly individuals have been affected positively, and have learned things. But infection and pregnancy rates are not approaching the hoped-for shift.²³ (Ironically this makes Gates's contraceptive plan less hazardous than it would be otherwise, but it does not bode well for her program, either.) This is hard for volunteers to understand. Though it need not be a death sentence today, nobody desires HIV. People know about condoms, but do not use them. What is going on here?

In southern Africa I participated in a workshop on HIV/AIDS prevention and treatment, with PCVs and our community counterparts. These counterparts are pillars of their communities, entrusted with volunteers: school-board chairs, principals, health-department officials, clinic managers, health teachers, and health-education regional managers. My experience with this group was eye opening. When the facilitator asked counterparts how HIV was spread, diverse voices (Batswana, Zulu, adolescent, and elderly) explained methods of infection precisely. Similarly the counterparts were well versed on how condoms can prevent sexual transmission. For the PCVs it was a surprise, then, when the facilitator asked if the counterparts ever used condoms. Not a hand went up. It was a day of discussing all things related to health, sexuality, body parts, and decision making. AIDS impacts everyone's life in rural southern Africa, and the counterparts were not being shy. Finally, we asked what we should have asked in the first place, to reveal something useful about our colleagues' frames of mind: Why haven't *you* ever used condoms?

To have children is essential in their communities, they explained. In the first place, to use a condom would offend a partner, because every able body will have children. One would be expressing that his or her partner was unfit for parenting. In the second place, it is deviant to desire intercourse but not children. Third: Who would not want children? The counterparts erupted. Who are all of you strange whites here without your children; why do you not want children? Why would you want to avoid having children when you could?

In South Africa, British and Afrikaner governments visibly feared black fertility throughout the twentieth century. Today black South Africans still recognize a "numbers game," and "feel instinctively that it is politically necessary to defend traditional African social structures when the whites seem so keen on

changing them.”²⁴ The long history of family planning in many African colonial regimes is normally discussed uncritically in demographic and health literature in relation to “mysteriously stable” African fertility.²⁵ In fact, “The most distinctive aspect of African demography is that high fertility is achieved by a series of mechanisms that overcome quite severe constraints on fertility.”²⁶ Missing from many such reports are references to colonial attitudes, postcolonial identities, and dialogically developed conceptions of family. A lack of awareness of family planning is constructed; the rest is regarded as trivia.

In many rural African communities conformity is also highly valued. All PCVs are given scripts to explain why they lack children (or where their pretend children are), why they skip church, and so on, because volunteers can become discredited without children and church. Western serial monogamy is often frowned upon in Africa, where South African president Jacob Zuma married three of his six wives in the last five years. Many people engage in lifelong relationships with multiple partners throughout sub-Saharan Africa. More effective strategies for curbing the spread of HIV/AIDS there focus on this trend, which makes sporadic condom use particularly problematic, as infection is more likely shortly after contraction.²⁷ (When people take more than six months between partners, they may discover their infection before meeting someone new, and are less infectious than they were after initial contraction.)

That different values and attitudes about sexuality have evolved dialogically, and may not respond ideally to the deficiency model and philosophy of education around preventing HIV/AIDS, is not intuitive to the Peace Corps or Melinda Gates. They presume to change practices and values by offering people what *they* want to give, assuming a hierarchy of values and practices to be ascended across communities. My desire would be to focus more on HIV/AIDS health care, as in some places over 30 percent of the adult population has HIV or AIDS, but still could live well with medical assistance. (In many cases Africans are seeing witch doctors to “cure” AIDS today, as well.) Regardless, a critical engagement of the assumptions about deficiency, values, and community interests in development contexts would serve here, while “superior” knowledge and gifts is unlikely to make the difference sought.

GLOBALIZED PHILOSOPHY OF EDUCATION TO THE RESCUE?

The rise today of “voluntourism” — where people simultaneously tour and serve a developing country — speaks to the joy helping others can bring, while raising the question of who should benefit and how in development work. As I reflect upon Hytten’s students, the compassionate global citizens, I wonder whether they should join the Peace Corps or volun-tour, if they want to help others without becoming cynical. Another recent example of market consumption of do-gooding is TOMS shoes. People buy TOMS-brand shoes, and TOMS sends a second pair to a child in a developing country. This seems an even clearer case of people conflating their interests with those of others, assuming interconnectedness, but also deficiency. Of course, shoes are available almost everywhere. It is wasteful mailing, even if children liked the style. As one commentator put it, “Toms [sic] shoes are merely a symbol to the public that their owner is a charitable person.”²⁸ According

to the TOMS website, “a leading cause of disease in developing countries is soil-transmitted diseases,” and lack of shoes also can prevent children from attending school. No sources are cited here, though TOMS’s founder, Blake Mycoskie, saw children without shoes in Argentina, himself.²⁹

Though this essay has not attempted to resolve the question of how one person or organization’s interest in helping others can align with the interests of those others in international development, it points to an expanded view of educational philosophy for social justice. Globalizing philosophy of education can reveal important relational and ideological aspects of international development work while broadening the base of educational inquiry, also identifying education as a major component of development projects. The desire to help others is not wrong, and need not lead to bad things. Yet assuming cross-cultural deficiency, and cultural isolation in the development of practices, beliefs, and values, invariably leads to projects that preclude praxis, emphasizing and entrenching inequality and cultural superiority rather than enabling individuals and communities.

The desire to help others has a conception of humankind and social development that requires thinking through. Philosophers of education are well poised to evaluate these foundations of development work, development education, and the like, compared to other relevant parties, such as anthropologists, urban planners, or philanthropic managers. Starting with a view of international engagement as a meeting of intersecting, relational values and beliefs, a globalized philosophy of education can elaborate practical implications of compassionate global citizenship through contextual explorations. Classroom practices toward such citizenship can also be elucidated within the broad setting of the interactive, multifaceted world community. Globalizing philosophy of education is one way to answer Hytten’s call to use knowledge to improve our world, something much easier said than done.

1. See, for instance, Richard Shweder, “The Idea of Moral Progress: Bush Versus Posner Versus Berlin,” (and essay responses) in *Philosophy of Education 2003*, ed. Kal Alston (Urbana, IL: Philosophy of Education Society, 2004); and Josh Corngold, “Egregiously Conflated Concepts: An Examination of ‘Toleration as Recognition,’” *Philosophy of Education 2005*, ed. Kenneth Howe (Urbana, IL: Philosophy of Education Society, 2006); and, Liz Jackson, “Choice Versus Equal Opportunity: On What Toleration Requires in the Case of the *Hijab* in French Schools,” in *Philosophy of Education 2005*, ed. Howe.

2. Kathy Hytten, “Education for Critical Democracy and Compassionate Globalization,” *Philosophy of Education 2009*, ed. Ronald Glass (Urbana, IL: Philosophy of Education Society, 2010), 333.

3. One example of this is the uncritical fascination with Japan’s education system in the 1970s and 1980s. While the United States learned from Japan to lengthen the school day and school year, the Japanese looked to the United States for student-centered practices. See Robert Arno, “Introduction: Reframing Comparative Education,” in *Comparative Education*, eds. Arno and Carlos Alberto Torres (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2007).

4. Fazal Rizvi and Bob Lingard, *Globalizing Education Policy* (London: Routledge, 2010), 3.

5. Fazal Rizvi, “Beyond the Social Imaginary of ‘Clash of Civilizations’?” *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 43, no. 3 (2011): 225–235.

6. Tami Hultman, “Africa: Beyond Contraceptive Controversy — Melinda Gates Bets on Pro-Life Policies,” *All Africa*, July 23, 2012.

7. George Wirnkar, “African Babies Aren’t the Threat,” *Washington Times*, July 16, 2012.

8. Hultman, "Africa."
9. Malcolm Potts et al., "Reassessing HIV Prevention," *Science* 320, no. 5877 (2008): 749–750; Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, "Working with Botswana to Confront Its Devastating AIDS Crisis," (2006), <http://docs.gatesfoundation.org/learning/documents/achap.pdf>; and Alex Ezeh, Blessing Mberu, and Jacques Emina, "Stall in Fertility Decline in Eastern African Countries: Regional Analysis of Patterns, Determinants and Implications," *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society* 364, no. 1532 (2009): 2991–3007.
10. Melinda Gates, "Keynote Speech," XVI International AIDS Conference, Toronto, ON, August 13, 2006.
11. Charles Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 106.
12. *Ibid.*, 23.
13. This information is available on the Peace Corps Website Africa pages at <http://peacecorps.gov>.
14. Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Continuum, 1989).
15. Maya Lau, "What the Peace Corps Taught Me About Failure," *Huffington Post*, November 17, 2011.
16. David Ross Patient, "Empowerment Ethics," *DavidPatient.com* (2012).
17. Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*.
18. Once I assisted a volunteer organization giving eye exams and handing out eyeglasses in South Africa. The group had to ask locals to give workshops explaining pupil dilation for the project, as rumors suggested that white foreigners had come to blind poor black Africans! Mutual mistrust and misunderstanding happens easily in these contexts.
19. Maria C. Lugonés and Elizabeth V. Spelman, "Have We Got a Theory for You! Feminist Theory, Cultural Imperialism, and the Demand for 'the Woman's Voice,'" *Women's Studies International Forum* 6, no. 6 (1983).
20. Stephanie Smith, "Melinda Gates Responds to Contraception Program Controversy," *CNN*, July 6, 2012.
21. Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 63.
22. I risk overgeneralizing. Timothy Reagan discusses the challenge but not impossibility of speaking of an "African" experience or culture; see *Non-Western Educational Traditions* (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 2000).
23. Potts et al., "Reassessing HIV Prevention."
24. John Caldwell and Pat Caldwell, "The South African Fertility Decline," *Population and Development Review* 19, no. 2 (1993): 249.
25. For instance, Ezeh, Mberu, and Emina, "Stall in Fertility Decline."
26. John Caldwell and Pat Caldwell, "The Cultural Context of High Fertility in Sub-Saharan Africa," *Population and Development Review* 13, no. 3 (1987): 411.
27. Edward Green, "Condoms, HIV-AIDS and Africa," *Washington Post*, March 29, 2009; and Potts et al., "Reassessing HIV Prevention."
28. Megan Hoye, "Are TOMS Shoes Best Fit for Philanthropy?" *The Falcon* 83, no. 30 (2009).
29. TOMS, <http://tomsshoes.com>.