

The Forbidden Attraction of the Enlightened Despot

Emil Uddhammar

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In the political rhetoric of the West democracy is a prominent goal in development policies. However, many of the countries receiving the most development aid are far from democratic. We ask here why it is the case that the West time and again supports and underpins autocratic leaders and regimes in the developing world. One hypothesis is that there is a strong mechanism of wishful thinking at work. Western leaders seem to look for what they judge to be “enlightened” leaders in third world countries, perhaps having in mind that the “enlightened despots” of their own history brought about, if not democracy, at least order and development. The focus in the mainstream development discourse – such as the Millennium Goals – on “output” as a measure of development, with no mention of gains in democracy and human rights, is another possible explanation. Examining views expressed by Western leaders and academics about two autocratic leaders, Paul Kagame of Rwanda and the late Meles Zenawi of Ethiopia, it is shown that they indeed are projected as “enlightened”, and that their democratic deficit is mostly excused, when they are perceived to deliver on other developmental goals.

Many of the governments in the developing world favoured by Western powers are far from democratic. This was the case in the Middle East before revolutions erupted in the region in 2009, and also in sub-Saharan Africa. Leaders who received extensive support from the West, without being democratic, include Hosni Mubarak in Egypt, Yoweri Museveni in Uganda, Meles Zenawi in Ethiopia and Paul Kagame in Rwanda. Earlier examples are Julius Nyerere in Tanzania and – in the first years of his rule – Robert Mugabe in Zimbabwe. French presidents have had very good relations with several autocrats in Francophone Africa such as Omar Bongo in Gabon – a ruler for 42 years – and his son and successor after disputed elections, Ali Ben Bongo. Another example is Felix Houphouët-Boigny, a member of the French National Assembly and a minister in several French governments 1957-1961 and president of Côte d’Ivoire 1960-1993.

The question in this paper is why democratic governments and leaders in the West time and again keep favouring autocratic leaders and their governments in the developing world, even though the donors themselves are principled democrats at home and in official foreign policy declarations.

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There seems to be a subtle psychological mechanism of wishful thinking involved, where western leaders and academics over and over again project their hopes for a better outcome on a few promising leaders in Africa. This seems to happen despite the well-known long term risk of corruption and autocracy. One argument put forward here is that western leaders project “promising” African leaders as “enlightened despots” and thus acceptable, as opposed to non-enlightened despots, *ergo* non-acceptable.¹

A hypothesis in this paper is that, in the practical politics of the West, leaders in developing countries are generally judged by Western leaders to be enlightened if: (1) they personally are seen to be intelligent and educated, (2) they follow a reformist political and economic agenda, whose basic principles are shared by the Western donors and (3) the administration is efficient and delivers an “output” that is generally consistent with mainstream development goals set by the West. The deviant norm is democratic procedures, a point where the parties may not agree. We will further argue here that if conditions 1-3 above are met, a “democratic deficit” is seen, by Western leaders, to be a tolerable flaw.

This goes against some opinions in the democratization debate, e.g. Levitsky and Way (2010) who argued that an authoritarian regime is more likely to become democratic, if it is closely linked with states in the West, if the leverage of the West on the regime is high and if the regime’s organizational capacity is high.

It has been claimed that there are other, more pragmatic or pecuniary reasons for West’s support to less democratic regimes, such as access to valuable resources and markets. This may be true, but here we will consider economic co-operation and allowing foreign direct investment (FDI) as part of the political norms shared (criterion 2 above). The same is the case where developing countries co-operate on international security and anti-terrorism. If the government in question shares basic principles on these issues with the Western countries, and are willing to act upon them, it shows that they share the same agenda and output priorities (criteria 2 and 3).

Another reason behind close ties between the West and authoritarian leaders in developing countries could be “socialization at the top”. Following the German 20th century sociologist Robert Michels, we could assume that being part of the exclusive club of government leaders in the world, fraternised by the ambassadors of the major Western powers and by leading figures such as European and US ministers or even presidents, could mean that leaders in the

1 “Favouring” in this context means giving aid or in other ways diplomatically and politically supporting the regime. For a comparative table indicating the African countries having received the most Overseas Development Aid on a bilateral basis, with Freedom House Political Rights and the Polity IV scorings, see Appendix, Table A1. Please note that this paper is not normative in the sense that it in any way suggests that the West should support autocratic regimes.

developing world gradually come to share the same policy norms, should they not have them from the start. This process could be facilitated if promises of loans or aid, civil and military, enter the equation.

There may also be more practical reasons. Lise Rakner and Nicolas van de Walle have found that there is a general tendency among donors to favour the incumbent party even when implementing programs aiming at democratization, because the government is usually the more convenient and practical party to do business with (Rakner 2011:1118; Rakner and van de Walle 2009:113).

Here we will look more closely at two typical cases of autocratic regimes in sub-Saharan Africa, with the same person being in power for an extended period of time, and also being widely supported by Western governments: Meles Zenawi in Ethiopia and Paul Kagame of Rwanda. Top bilateral donors to these countries in 2007–2011 were the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada, Germany, Japan, the Netherlands, Ireland, Sweden, Spain, Italy, Belgium, Canada and Luxembourg.²

Neither country has any large known deposits of valuable minerals or fossil fuels. Both countries have seen extraordinary economic growth, a drastic fall in child mortality, an expansion of the public health system, attracted foreign direct investment and shown a generally positive development from an “output” point of view.³

Meles Zenawi of Ethiopia on the one hand, and Paul Kagame of Rwanda on the other, have both emerged victorious from civil wars, and then stayed in power for a long time. The two countries have very poor records on democratic freedoms and political rights, but rank very high as recipients of bilateral development aid, both in absolute terms and measured as a percentage of total GNI.

Rwanda today ranks -3 on the Polity IV index (where 10 is fully democratic and -10 is fully autocratic) and 6 in the Freedom House index on Political Rights (7 is the least democratic). Opposition political parties are regularly harassed, their leaders often put on trial for obscure reasons a few months before an election, and press freedom is ranked at number 161 of the world’s 179 countries in the Reporters Without Borders index for 2013.

Ethiopia is a country with an equally dismal democratic record, with a score of 1 on the Polity IV index and 5.4 on the Freedom House Political Rights index. As in Rwanda, the political opposition has been severely harassed, and increasingly so before the 2010 elections. The long-standing conflict between Ethiopia and the separatist movement in the Ogaden province has contributed to a deterioration in political rights and civic freedoms. On press free-

2 Aid Flows (<http://www.aidflows.org/>) with data from OECD, The World Bank and The Asian Development Bank. See Appendix, Table A1.

3 Cf World Bank, *World development indicators*.

dom Ethiopia ranks at 137 among the world's 179 countries, in the Reporters Without Borders index.

Paul Kagame received schooling in Uganda up to secondary level, military training as an intelligence officer in Tanzania as part of Museveni's National Resistance Army (NRA) and further military training in the US at the United States Army Command and General Staff College. Meles Zenawi attended a private English school in Addis Ababa, the General Wingate High school, and then studied medicine at Addis Ababa University (at the time known as Haile Selassie University) for two years before joining the Tigrayan People's Liberation Front (TPLF) in 1975. Zenawi later obtained a Masters in Business Administration at the Open University via correspondence and studied for a Masters in Economics at the Erasmus University at Rotterdam.^{4, 5}

Both leaders emerged into politics after waging successful wars against former regimes: Zenawi as president in 1991, after overthrowing the Mengistu regime, Kagame in 1994 as vice president, having been the "tactician behind" and after 1990 commander of the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) in its fight against the Rwandan government (The New York Times, July 20th, 1994). They have been elected to office several times, but only after using considerable repression vis-à-vis the political opposition and media.

What follows is an overview of the agenda and general discourse of two typical enlightened despots of the 18th century. This part is intended to give a historical comparison and also to present the ideal type of the enlightened despot in European history, a type which is still very well known among European leaders and academics. This part is followed by an outline of the "enlightened" development agenda of today, after which we examine the reception by representative Western politicians, academics and media of two typical "enlightened despots" of recent times in Africa, Paul Kagame and Meles Zenawi respectively.⁶ Finally we will conclude the examination and summarise our findings.

Enlightened despots of the 18th century

To gain a perspective, we will first briefly recall a period of European history when paradigmatic "enlightened despots" ruled, an era which still occupies

4 de Waal (2012) p 151 claims that he graduated first in his class; Malone (2013) says that he came third in his class.

5 Zenawi wrote his unfinished dissertation under the supervision of the former Dutch Minister of Development Cooperation, Jan Pronk (de Waal 2012:151).

6 The assumption is made here that the norms and views of Western political leaders and institutions, journalists and academia on the mainstream development agenda to a considerable degree overlap. Comments and views from Western leaders – as far as available – have been cited here, in parallel with representative Western media and academics. The empirical material was selected by electronic search in various resources at the Uppsala University Library on "Paul Kagame" and Meles Zenawi" respectively.

a prominent place among historians and in public discourse. The aim here is not to evaluate the practical consequences of their government in detail, but to give a general picture of the kind of rule they represented and how it is looked upon today.

The 18th century was the era of “enlightened despotism” manifested by rulers such as Catherine II of Russia, Charles III of Spain, Frederick II of Prussia and Gustaf III of Sweden.⁷ Some scholars would include Napoleon I as the last representative of this category (Behrens 1975:401-402). Characteristic of their kind of rule – apart from a high degree of autocracy – was an ambition to impose equal rights before the law, a widening of property rights, extending freedom of speech and religion, ending religious oppression and superstition – e.g. banning witch hunts – and to promote economic reform, trade and commerce. At the same time education, science, literature and the arts were promoted. In the words of enlightenment scholar, Peter Gay, “these emperors, kings, czarinas and grand dukes worked to clear up a morass of regulations, to lighten the financial burdens of trade, to make more or less sincere moves toward humanizing the criminal law, to aid the education of farmers and craftsmen – in a word [...] to rationalize their states” (Gay 1969:492). It seems as if many of these problems – and the general ideas on how to fix them – are quite similar to those mentioned in the dominant development discourse of today. We should at the same time remember that several of the noble items on the agenda of these rulers did not result in any tangible general progress.

In Sweden, following the death of Charles XII in 1718, the four estates introduced a remarkably democratic rule by parliament, with the monarch reduced to ceremonial powers. However, King Gustaf III (1746-1792) deliberately curbed the powers of the estates and strengthened his own executive powers through a coup d'état and a new constitution in 1772. The King was partly inspired by Montesquieu and his ideas on the separation of powers. By an amendment to the constitution in 1789 the executive was granted even greater – though not exclusive – powers. These changes were facilitated by support from the lower estates, and implemented in the face of fierce opposition from the House of the Nobility. Liberal reforms were introduced, government jobs ceased to be an exclusive privilege for the nobility, widespread corruption in political circles was fought and the arts promoted. Gustaf III was also highly gifted as a writer and practitioner of drama, literature and as a speaker. The few and limited wars Sweden fought were successful or ended without defeat.

7 The term *despotisme éclairé* was first used by the French economist and physiocrat Perre Paul Le Mercier de la Rivière in his book *L'Ordre naturel et essentiel des sociétés politiques*, published in 1767; separately and later the phrase *aufgeklärte Absolutismus* was used by the German economist Wilhelm Roscher in his *Umrissen zur Naturlehre der drei Staatsformen*, 1847. The concept *despotisme légal* was used with a similar meaning by Le Mercier de la Rivière, and was criticized by, among others, Voltaire.

The King had a personal mandate as the highest protector of the courts, and he used his executive powers to propose and implement liberal legal reforms, such as reducing the imposition of the death penalty and abolishing the use of torture. He introduced new regional courts, making the legal system more efficient and accessible (Tandefelt 2007:157). The King circumvented the powers of the estates in parliament by personally handing out entitlements and royal orders, also to the non-privileged classes. A number of scientific institutions and academies were founded – among them the Royal Swedish Academy, later given the task of selecting recipients of the Nobel Prize in Literature. Gustaf III invited to Sweden a number of foreign experts in architecture, music and other fields.

To this day, Gustaf III has a comparatively positive standing in Swedish history, though he is naturally not without his critics.⁸ “The Gustavian era” in Sweden is considered as a time of wit, poetry, literature, music, art and architecture, agrarian reform and increased trade. This does not mean that it resulted in general progress for the population in all respects, even though agrarian productivity increased. Gustaf’s political enemies within the privileged classes hated him to the degree that he was murdered in 1792.⁹ His reign is, however, often contrasted with the “chaos” of parliamentary rule preceding it, and the subsequent “disastrous” rule of his son, King Gustaf IV – who lost Finland to Russia in 1809.

Much the same goes for the Prussian king and reformer Frederick II (1712–1786), also called the Great or, affectionately in Germany, “der Alte Fritz”. Typically in Prussia the powers of the church were curbed, the arts and sciences promoted and legal and economic reforms introduced. Frederick II was an able musician – he played the flute – and also a composer, a philosopher and a naturalist.¹⁰ His friendship with Voltaire is well known. He was witty, self-questioning and also an able and feared statesman, general and politician.

In Prussia at the time of Frederick II a great number of literary salons emerged in civil society throughout the country, which resulted in a lively debate on social, economic and political matters: These salons were accepted and even encouraged. Immanuel Kant, the Königsberg philosopher, coined the

8 The critics mostly focus on the concentration of power to the monarch and the breach of aspiring democratic tendencies in the preceding era. Those positive tend to focus on the progress within government, the curbing of widespread corruption and foreign intervention, and the promotion of the arts. For an overview of the historical literature and its views on Gustaf III see Carlsson & Rosén, 1969, pp 159–160, 202–205 and Tandefelt, 2007, pp 18–25.

9 Jacob Johan Anckarström shot Gustaf III on the 16th of March 1792 during a masked ball in Stockholm.

10 Examples of how Frederick was seen in 19th century are the famous paintings by Adolph von Menzel *Flötenkonzert Friedrichs des Großen in Sanssouci* from 1850–52 (<http://www.flickr.com/photos/gandalfsgallery/5859664506/>) and *Tafelrunde König Friedrich II in Sanssouci mit Voltaire* from 1850 (<http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/4/42/Adolphvon-Menzel-Tafelrunde2.jpg>) (the latter painting was destroyed in 1945).

phrase typical of the era: *Sapere aude!* (Dare to know!) However, according to Kant, Frederick's reign allowed freedom only up to a certain point: "Argue as much as you will about whatever you choose; but obey"¹¹.

There was no democracy in Prussia, but it was in many respects a remarkably open society for its time (Clark 2006: 239-240; 247-257). The press was not formally free but "censorship was sufficiently mild to permit lively and robust political debate, both in print and speech" (Clark 2006: 256). Historian Christopher Clark argues that the meaning of the "obey" sentence from Kant above was not all about subservience. In Frederick, the enlightenment movement had a powerful ally, in stark contrast to, say, Louis XVI in France. This personal unity of monarch and enlightenment bestowed a "unique meaning upon the relationship between civil society and the state in Prussia", according to Clark. Kant argued that this combination created a paradox: "under a truly enlightened sovereign, moderate constraints on the degree of political liberty might actually create a space in which the people may expand to the fullness of their power" (Clark 2006:255).

Cameralism, the science of government taught at Prussian universities at the time, underlined the connection between the enlightenment and the state. It was a political theory that favoured reforms and an efficient bureaucracy and opposed exclusive aristocratic privileges for administrative office in government. At the same time it was an authoritarian model: paternalism seemed the only practical path to general betterment (Gay 1969:488-489). The philosopher Christian Wolff, who influenced Frederick II, identified the legal bureaucratic state as having responsibilities for health, education, labour protection and security. Frederick II wrote in his "Political Testament" of 1752: "The ruler is the first servant of the state. He is paid well so that he can maintain the dignity of his office. But he is required in return to work effectively for the well-being of the state" (Cited in Clark 2006:240).

Also the enlightenment in civil society was to a considerable extent carried forward by civil servants. Prussia, at the time of the enlightenment, was in no small degree involved in the endeavour which today is often described as "state building" (Gay 1969:490-491; Clark (2006:253). The legacy of Frederick II was for a time severely tainted by the distorted propaganda in his favour during the years of National Socialism in Germany.¹² His Silesian wars and expansionist politics have also been criticised, but his other political and cultural achievements put him in a more favourable light.¹³ This has been reflected in a number of exhibitions and biographies during recent decades. The latest major exhibi-

11 Kant 1784, s 493: "Räsonniert, soviel ihr wollt, und worüber ihr wollt; nur gehorcht!"

12 One dramatic consequence of this was that the Allied powers, in 1947 decided to abolish Prussia as a political entity.

13 An assessment of the modern debate on Friedrich II is found e.g. in Behrens 1975, 404-405 and Clark 2006.

tion – “Friederisiko” – was staged in Potsdam in 2012, commemorating 300 years since the birth of the “Philosopher King”.¹⁴

The enlightenment discourse in the times of the “philosopher kings” certainly reached back to Plato, Aristotle and the classical literature on how to govern a state. But in this they were also distinctly modern – like the enlightenment movement itself – in proposing a more egalitarian system than before, such as equality before the law, as opposed to the medieval privileges of the nobility, the church and the guilds. It also envisioned a less regulated economic system, based on the sanctity of private property and contract – also a prominent feature of the French Revolution – as opposed to feudal systems of entitlement. Beyond this was the cameralist idea that the state should have wider responsibilities – to take on social issues, education and health policies – via an efficient bureaucracy.

This also points to interesting parallels with current issues in the development discourse: state building, efficient and “inclusive” institutions and the rule of law. We will take a look at this agenda in the next section.

The “enlightened” development agenda of today

What, then, is the “enlightened agenda” of today, what are the policies and reforms that would – according to the hypothesis put forward in this paper – let third world leaders “get away” with despotism?

The development discourse of today focuses on some basic institutional principles: Hobbesian peace, the sanctity of contract, the rule of law, socio-economic development and democratic governance.

Following Thomas Hobbes, Mancur Olson has argued that it is more rational for a population to opt for a “stationary bandit” – i.e. a permanent and predictable government – than having to cope with unpredictable, roving bandits (Olson 2000:6-19). This will also be more rational for the ruler in the long run. In a similar vein, Elinor Ostrom and Martin Sjöstedt have argued, separately, that “credible commitments” in voluntary co-operation, and from the government vis-à-vis the citizens, regarding basic rights including property rights, the rule of law and control of corruption, are pivotal for development (Ostrom 1990:43-45; Sjöstedt 2008:45-69). Without such “credible commitments”, citizens will not trust their government, and there will be no basis for democratic or economic development. Institutions that are “inclusive” will foster development, whereas the opposite, “extractive” institutions, will hinder development, prosperity and poverty reduction (Acemoglu and Robinson 2012:70-87).

14 “Friedrich der Große – ‚Modeaffe‘ und Hundenarr“, Die Welt 2012-04-28 (<http://www.welt.de/kultur/history/article106234300/Friedrich-der-Grosse-Modeaffe-und-Hundenarr.html>) Retrieved 2013-05-22; „In den Schatzkammern des Philosophenkönigs“ *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 2012-04-27.

Amartya Sen has incorporated both negative – classical liberal – and positive freedoms – such as the right to education and healthcare – into the mainstream development discourse (Sen 2000). Since the 1980s a number of macroeconomic indicators such as the control of inflation and budget deficits have been included in the mainstream. Three of the main items brought up by Paul Collier in his influential book “The bottom billion” in 2007 were the “conflict trap” – corresponding to Hobbesian peace – “the natural resource trap” – corresponding to lack of credible commitments and lack of efficiency, and “bad governance”, corresponding to widespread corruption and inefficiency (Collier 2007: 17-52, 64-78).

Democracy has been included as an important goal for development in Western policies, particularly since the end of the Cold War. However, one of the most influential development indicators, the Human Development Indicator – created by Amartya Sen – includes GDP per capita, education and health – but not democratic governance. It focuses on “outcome”. The same goes for the eight UN millennium goals – democracy is no part of them.¹⁵

In the recent discourse relating to authoritarian rule and Western governments we find similar traits. An Italian researcher, Cecilia Emma Sottiolotta, finds that “political stability” is often a key value when Western governments look for partners among developing countries, and she detects such “pro-stability policies” both in the US and in the EU. In her view, political stability is primarily defined as the absence of domestic civil conflict and widespread violence. Secondly, she defines it as government longevity. Both criteria correspond with the Hobbesian notion of basic social peace. Sottiolotta argues that the absence of structural change and general human development together form part of “political stability” (Sottiolotta 2013:2-4). The agenda described above is the mainstream “enlightened” development agenda adhered to by most Western governments and the OECD in the last two decades.

In the western developmental discourse it has been argued that what matters is the respective governments’ ability to produce developmental outcomes. Democracy, elections, rule of law, accountability should not be concerns of donors, unless these issues stand in the way of development (Kelsall 2011:223-251). It could be argued that the Quality of Government agenda with its emphasis on governance implementation – impartiality is a key concern – is another important intellectual force, questioning the logic of donors focusing on democracy and human rights.

To reiterate, the hypothesis put forward here is that in the practical politics of the West, leaders in developing countries are generally judged to be “enlight-

15 The eight goals are: eradicate extreme hunger, achieve universal primary education, promote gender equality and empower women, reduce child mortality, improve maternal health, combat infectious diseases, ensure sustainable development and global partnership on development (facilitating trade, affordable medical drugs etc). (<http://www.un.org/millenniumgoals/>).

ened” – and thus accepted or supported – by Western leaders, if they are seen to be intelligent and educated, follow an agenda whose basic principles are shared by the Western donors and are efficient in delivering an “output” that conforms with the above mainstream development agenda. If these conditions are met, it is likely that a democratic deficit will be tolerated.

Paul Kagame

In the international community Western leaders such as Bill Clinton have called Paul Kagame of Rwanda “one of the greatest leaders of our time” and Tony Blair has dubbed him “a visionary leader”.

In an interview in *Foreign Policy* (December 2009) Bill Clinton was asked which top three leaders people should pay attention to, other than Obama. After mentioning Kevin Rudd of Australia, Clinton continues: “I think people should study what Paul Kagame did in Rwanda. It is the only country in the world that has more women than men in Parliament [...] It may not be perfect, but Rwanda has the greatest capacity of any developing country I have seen to accept outside help and make use of it. It’s hard to accept help. They’ve done that. And how in God’s name does he get every adult in the country to spend one Saturday every month cleaning the streets? And what has the psychological impact of that been? The identity impact? The president says it’s not embarrassing, it’s not menial work, it’s a way of expressing your loyalty to and your pride in your country. How do you change your attitudes about something that you think you know what it means? How did he pull that off?” (*Foreign Policy*, December 2009). The book “A thousand hills. Rwanda’s rebirth and the man who dreamed it” by journalist Stephen Kinzer expresses general approval of Kagame’s efforts. Kinzer cites his sense of urgency, visions, seriousness and fight against corruption (Kinzer 2008: 220-221, 233-243). Influential American politicians on both sides of the aisle are quoted saying that Kagame is a moral leader who has done an outstanding job. Business leaders and development consultants on the left are equally appreciative (Kinzer 2008:309-310). Kinzer refers to numerous discussions with diplomats whom he cites as supporting the development efforts of Kagame. The British Ambassador at the time, Jeremy Macadie, is cited as saying that if you apply Western standards “no, [Rwanda] isn’t a democracy”, and he continues:

If, on the other hand, you ask, ‘Is this government working for the benefit of the general population? Is it working to assure that people have enough to eat? Does it have a vision to lift this country out of poverty?’ – then the answer is yes. [...] Giving people food, clean water and, health care, and education is also very important. Are Rwandan leaders trying the best they can at all levels to improve conditions for the most needy people in this country?

Yes. Are they trying to build a country in which all Rwandans can enjoy long-term peace and progress? Yes. [...] (Kinzer 2008:327).

This statement by the British Ambassador to Rwanda 2004-2008 is enlightening in the way that it clearly indicates the normative division that forms the basis of the thesis put forward in the present paper: a democratic deficit is acceptable, in the eyes of the West, in practical politics, if the reformist agenda and the projected “output” – here very clearly in line with both the HDI and several UN millennium goals – largely overlap with the Western agenda. Working for long-term peace is also a basic, Hobbesian norm.

It also corresponds with the “enlightened despot” agenda in focusing on effective, more rational government, furthering the health, education and security along Cameralist lines, and the politicians being perceived as working “effectively for the well-being of the state”.

But Kinzer also gives space for the story of harsh treatment of the political opposition. He cites several international human rights groups – Amnesty, Human Rights Watch, Freedom House and others – “organizations Rwandan leaders detest” (Kinzer 2008:331). These organisations cite the lack of human rights, oppression of the opposition and particularly the plight of Hutu activists. Kinzer then discusses the “social controls” in Rwanda, and draws attention to the fact that there are some restrictions on free speech even in Western countries (Kinzer 2008:330). He then cites a Rwandan, Solange Katarebe, a former professional with the DHL Company, who later started a restaurant in Kigali with her brother:

It drives me nuts when Westerners come to the restaurant and ask me ‘Aren’t you oppressed?’ [...] People need to understand that if there are controls in terms of security, it’s because of what happened in 1994. We need it. We want it. We’re happy, so leave us alone. I’m not even remotely political, but Rwanda is free and secure. That’s all I require, so why is human-rights-whatever to tell me I’m not free? (Kinzer 2008:331)

In this quote, it is clear that Kinzer gives voice to an interpretation of political freedom not far from the “paradox” Immanuel Kant saw in Prussia at the time of Frederick II: “under a truly enlightened sovereign, moderate constraints on the degree of political liberty might actually create a space in which the people may expand to the fullness of their power”.

In 2008 Fareed Zakaria expressed some thoughts on Kagame when promoting an interview with him on his CNN show (“Africa’s biggest success story”).¹⁶ Zakaria argued that “the country has achieved stability, economic growth, and international integration. Average incomes have tripled; the health care system is good enough that the Gates Foundation cites them as a model, education

¹⁶ “Zakaria: Africa’s biggest success story” published on the CNN website July 17, 2009 (<http://edition.cnn.com/2009/WORLD/africa/07/17/zakaria.rwanda/> obtained 2013-05-14).

levels are rising. The government is widely seen as one of the more efficient and honest ones in Africa.” Zakaria continued: “Much of it has to do with its president”, and praises the use of local, conciliation, courts. He concedes that there may be more beneath the surface of the success story. “And it may be that Kagame is holding it together with his personality and toughness [...] but he says his goal is to build institutions that outlive him”.

In an interview with Kagame in the *Wall Street Journal* in 2010 editorial writer Anne Jolis started out with a description of the chaos in Rwanda during and after the genocide in 1994, and says that you may expect a leader of such a country to talk mostly about the need for foreign aid. “But then you probably haven’t met Mr Kagame. His agenda for improving the state of his country boils down to one goal ‘spurring private investment’” (Jolis 2010:A11). Ms Jolis’ description of Paul Kagame entering for the interview is the following: “Gangly in a dark suit Mr Kagame meets me precisely on time for the interview. He speaks in paragraphs, eyes wide, and without a trace of the cynicism that it seems should be his right. The overall effect is more impassioned academic than storied warrior.” Aid, Kagame says in the interview, has created dependency, distorted markets and detached people from their leaders and their values, and has even created conflicts in some cases. He cites gradual improvements in property rights, government loans to farmers for fertilizer as part of the economic success. He criticises trade barriers put up by the West, and Ms Jolis concludes: “Mr Kagame has no intention of slowing the pace of reform.” Among the options he is considering is flat tax; he has learned about it from a fact-finding mission sent to Georgia. Ms Jolis also refers to a recent trip she made to Rwanda and says that “Policemen and soldiers are thin on the ground and citizens readily discuss politics with strangers”.

Interviewing Kagame in *Africa Business* in 2010, Sarah Rundell underlined the material success story of Rwanda, including high GDP growth, smart farming, higher living standards and IT-focus in schools. She cites the president prescribing “the medicine of prosperity” to his country in order for it to heal its wounds (Rundell 2010:36–38). Influential friends of Kagame like Tony Blair and Howard Schultz, CEO of Starbucks, are mentioned. On personality, Rundell writes that “apparently, any member of staff arriving after 7 am at the offices of [president Paul Kagame] will find the door locked”. A similar account of Kagame’s work ethics is found in Colin M Waugh’s book “Paul Kagame and Rwanda” (Waugh 2004:213–224).

Rundell also describes him as having “a personal style that is quiet and philosophical”. Discussing aid, she cites Kagame as being sceptical as there are prescriptions that come with it, and notes that “Rwanda has cut its dependency on aid by half in the past 15 years.”

In an interview published in the *World Policy Journal* by the editor David A Andelman and managing editor Christopher Shay, entitled “From Massacres

to Miracles”, Kagame is described as “wiry, soft-spoken but quite direct”. The first questions are about what other nations may learn from Rwanda’s “success story”, and how that success was achieved. After some fact-oriented and some more critical questions, the last question is about the fact that the Rwandan parliament has the highest percentage of women in the world, and “how that has affected female empowerment” (Andelman and Shay 2012:18-26).

A slightly more critical tone is noticeable in a piece in the German magazine *Die Zeit* from 2011, “Modernisierung mit Gewalt” (Modernization with power) by Benjamin Dürr. However, the main thrust of the article is a description of the ambitious goals of the Rwandan policy paper “Vision 2020”: to bring industrialization, promoting Information Technology across society and to create an IT and financial hub in Eastern Africa. The goal is to keep the economy and prosperity growing. “Kagame compares his country with the Asian tigers Singapore, South Korea and Taiwan and Hong Kong, which became successful financial and IT hubs with a digital leap”.¹⁷ An expert is quoted saying that the timeframe for this is wholly utopian, but he continues: “With this the country and the people at least has a goal, a vision [...] it will develop with the hopes of the people, calmly, peacefully and in a civilized fashion”.¹⁸

Similarly more critical is a piece in *The Guardian* by David Smith, under the headline “Paul Kagame’s Rwanda: African Success story or authoritarian state?”, which notes that “his halo is starting to slip”. The article cites opposition criticism, arrests and harassment of opposition figures and the critical UN report in 2012 claiming that Rwanda was supporting Hutu rebels in eastern Congo. It also cites Gerald Mpyisi, managing director of the Institute of Management and Leadership, saying:

The president is running the country like a CEO of a company who ensures that every director is accountable for their department. That is why, despite the lack of resources, you still find things happening. [...] I believe for a country in the third world to develop there has to be a certain element of organising the population. The West tries to use its standards in the developing world and it isn’t fair.¹⁹

Several reports early in 2012 indicated that Rwanda had achieved astonishing figures in growth and poverty reduction – poverty having fallen by 12 percent-

17 “Kagame sieht das Land in Ostafrika in einer Reihe mit den asiatische Tigerstaaten Singapur, Südkorea, Taiwan, Hong Kong, die meist einem digitalen Sprung zu Finanz- Wirtschafts- und Hightech-Zentren geworden sind.” Dürr, Benjamin (2011) “Modernisierung mit Gewalt” in *Die Zeit*, 10.02.2011.

18 “Jedoch bekämen das Land und die Menschen damit wenigstens ein Ziel, eine Perspektive. [...] Durch die Hoffnung der Menschen geht es ruhig, friedlich und gesittet zu.” Dürr, Benjamin (2011) “Modernisierung mit Gewalt” in *Die Zeit*, 10.02.2011.

19 Smith, David, “Paul Kagame’s Rwanda: African success story or authoritarian state?” in *The Guardian*, October 10, 2012. (<http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2012/oct/10/paul-kagame-rwanda-successauthoritarian>) obtained 2012-05-09.

age units in only six years.²⁰ The economy had been growing by seven to eight per cent per year since 2003, free schooling for 12 years had been introduced, as well as a quite comprehensive health system. More than 70 per cent of all child-births in the country were reported to take place in a clinic (Frøslev 2012:14–15). Paul Kagame and the government often make a point of the low level of corruption in the country.²¹ There is also a highly symbolic policy of collecting visitors' visible plastic bags on arrival at the airport.²²

In the examples above, we have seen several references to Kagame's height, being "wiry" or "gangly", a towering figure. We have also seen references to his personal virtues such as punctuality "meets me precisely in time", demanding work ethic – the staff arriving at his offices after 7 will not be let in. He is said to be "soft-spoken", he gives the impression of an "impassioned academic"; he is "quiet and philosophical": these are intellectual, enlightenment virtues. Other comments dwell on similar personal traits, such as his being "direct", having a vision of independence from aid, and running his country like a CEO. This is about the virtue of efficiency. Kagame's virtues are amplified, indirectly, by mentioning his friends: top Western leaders like Bill Clinton and Tony Blair, and a backing from CNN academic journalist Fareed Zakaria.

Kagame comes through as an intellectual but practical leader with stamina and perseverance. What he has achieved in terms of peace, healing a divided country, gender equality and development is generally praised. There is criticism, but that is almost entirely limited to abuses of human rights in relation to his handling of the political opposition.

This all changed in 2012 when he was criticised for supporting a Tutsi rebel group in Eastern Congo. This also proves our point: this was a clear break with the norms of the Western donors. Kagame threatened the basic Hobbesian peace in the region; he was no longer seen as "enlightened".

Meles Zenawi

In the early days of media coverage for Meles Zenawi, Jane Perlez gave a short portrait in *The New York Times* in 1991, "Man in the news: A mellowed Marxist Meles Zenawi". He is described as pragmatic, rather than ideological, in character and as "wiry, tough, almost hyperactive", but also having "a good strategic sense" (Perlez 1991). He was later described as a "darling of the Clinton admin-

20 "How did Rwanda cut poverty so much?" LA Times Blog 2012-02-16. (http://latimesblogs.latimes.com/world_now/2012/02/how-did-rwanda-cut-poverty-so-much.html) Retrieved 2013-05-21.

21 Rwanda in 2011 had country rank 50 out of 174, the fourth least corrupt country in sub-Saharan Africa after Botswana, Cape Verde and Mauritius.

22 Apart from being a possibly earnest environmental effort, it is highly symbolic and tells a tale to the visitor that this is an efficient and environmentally conscious regime.

istration” and having “close ties to the Bush administration” (*The Washington Post*, July 22, 2007).

A *Reuters* article in 2009 describes Ethiopia together with Nigeria as topping a new index of African potential investor destinations (Apps 2009). Several other articles give both praise and blame to Zenawi. Some prominent academics protested against the imprisonment of journalists, others against harsh treatment of the political opposition (Easterly 2012).

An article published in *The Economist* in 2009 describes Zenawi’s questionable human rights record and harsh policies towards the opposition. It also describes his co-operation with America on fighting jihadists in Somalia. The growing economy and reforms in agriculture are mentioned. Zenawi’s personality is portrayed:

His mind is sharp, his memory elephantine, and he bristles with energy and vigour. In a rare interview he speaks for two hours without notes. With his polished English, full of arcane turns of phrase from his days at a private English school in Addis Ababa [...] he captivates foreign donors (*The Economist*, August 13th, 2009).

Zenawi served as a member of the Commission for Africa set up by Tony Blair. He was frequently described as a “new generation” of African leaders, as “straight talking”, having close contacts with the USA, and he often represented Africa at G8, G20 and climate meetings (*Reuters*, November 23, 2010). Another *Reuters* article describes how the West “welcomed Africa’s new youngest leader enthusiastically, grateful for his overthrow of a communist regime and impressed with his obvious savvy.” It continues: “‘He intimidates Western ambassadors in Addis’, a junior diplomat told *Reuters*. ‘At their meetings, they bring up a subject and then he just lectures them on it’” (*Reuters*, May 21st, 2010).

Uwe Schmidt describes a vision for Ethiopia as a future IT hub, with 13 new universities planned (*Die Zeit*, May 17, 2008). Schmidt interviews a 32-year old Ethiopian software entrepreneur, educated in the US, who “could find a good job anywhere in the world”, but who has chosen his home country for his new business: “Addis is for me right now the most exciting place in Africa”.

In an obituary in *The Irish Times* it is claimed that “Meles drove Ethiopia forward with a huge range of reforms and global links. [...] Ethiopia has seen a dramatic lowering of infant mortality and a huge growth in education [...] There has been economic growth of up to 9 per cent most of the years of the new millennium.” (*The Irish Times*, February 21st, 2013). The article continues by praising the building boom and the doubling of food production. It also dwells on flawed elections and violence against the opposition, as well as his incursions into Somalia in pursuit of al-Shabab.

In an obituary published in *Foreign Policy* following the demise of Ethiopian Prime Minister Meles Zenawi in August 2012 Barry Malone, a former

Reuters correspondent in Ethiopia, described him as “masterful at dealing with Western governments”. He “cleverly played off their own security concerns and their rivalry with India and China”. Malone cites friends who said that “on very rare days” when he was not working he dressed down in “sweatpants and sneakers” and there were no private jets, Paris homes or yachts (Malone 2012). Again, the economic success of his policies is mentioned, and also contacts with academics and a craving for books, in his study of economics.

Perhaps the most interesting of the many obituaries of Zenawi was written by the prominent academic, Alex de Waal. The piece is formally a review of Zenawi’s unfinished Master’s Thesis in Economics at the Erasmus University of Rotterdam from 1998, “African Development: Dead ends and New Beginnings”.²³ On the first page of the review we learn that de Waal had had a long standing personal relationship with Mr Zenawi:

Over nearly 25 years, I was fortunate to be able to discuss political economy with him regularly, including critiquing his incomplete and unpublished master’s thesis. During this time, his thinking evolved, but his basic principles and sensibilities remained constant. World leaders have lauded Meles’ economic achievements without acknowledging their theoretical basis. Human rights organizations have decried his political record as though he were a routine despot with no agenda other than hanging on to power. Reviewing his writings on the developmental state, this essay shows the unity of his theory and practice (de Waal 2012:148).

We can infer from these humble words that the reviewer himself may have made some small contribution to the fact that Zenawi’s “thinking evolved”. We also understand that the Ethiopian leader was no “routine despot”, as his thinking was in union with his practice. Zenawi was in fact a despot enlightened both by his studies at Rotterdam and his recurring seminars with the reviewer. Of course we can think of other recent despots with “an agenda” that has not been judged as favourably by posterity. What is crucial here is, as discussed above, what kind of agenda the despot in question has.

In his review de Waal goes on to explain the main characteristics of Zenawi’s “democratic developmentalism” which “without question represents a serious attempt to develop, and apply, an authentically African philosophy of the goals and strategies of development”. Meles Zenawi had early abandoned Marxist doctrines, had agreed with neo-liberal theory that the predatory state following in the decades after liberation was a dead end, but insisted that the government had an important role to play. This insight had also reached the donor community by the early years of the 21st century (de Waal 2012:152). He looked at the success of South Korea and Taiwan, but also of China; he saw a prominent role

²³ de Waal is a director of the World Peace Foundation at the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy at Tufts University; formerly at Harvard University.

for the private sector but also for the government (Bach 2012:144-145) He came to the conclusion that “It is the politics of the state that unlocks development” (de Waal 2012:153).

From these sources, a picture emerges of an intelligent, purposeful leader with an energetic zeal for reform. Personal traits such as a sharp mind, an “elephantine memory” and an ability to lecture foreign diplomats on various issues clearly point in the direction of the intellectual virtues of an “enlightened despot”. Zenawi also had an entourage of foreign academics and journalists, who witnessed for him after his death in similar ways.

His military and political skills in dealing with the former regime and political opponents are not in doubt. The article by de Waal now cited is testimony to the fact that he consulted with Western academics, much as Friedrich II and Gustaf III invited philosophers and artisans in order to improve the states of their government. Like, presumably, Voltaire in Prussia and the French architect Desprez in Sweden, these intellectuals were flattered by the opportunity to influence a government leader, to take some part in “high politics”. This is most evident in de Waal’s apologia for Zenawi, as being no “routine despot with no agenda other than hanging on to power” but having a – presumably enlightened – purpose that was united with his practice.

Again, highly placed friends like UK Prime Minister Tony Blair and US presidents Bill Clinton and George H W Bush shed some of their lustre on Zenawi. Policies resulting in high growth figures, a decline in child mortality and poverty rates, in combination with an engagement against terrorists such as Al-Shabab in Somalia, are strong indicators that the “output” of Zenawi’s politics was one favoured by the West.

Conclusion

The question that we set out to answer in this paper was why democratic governments and leaders in the West time and again favour autocratic leaders and their governments in the developing world, even though the donors themselves are principled democrats at home and in their official foreign policy declarations.

We suggested that there is a subtle psychology involved, where western leaders and academics project their hopes and dreams for a better Africa on a few promising leaders.

We have found several telling instances where there is considerable common ground between the present Western development discourse and the “enlightened despots” agenda of the 18th century. We have also found common ground between Western political assessments of “enlightened” authoritarian leaders of Africa today and the general assessment of 18th century despots. Both

these facts tend to underline the psychological mechanism of pinning hope for a better future in Africa on “promising” leaders.

We have argued here that these are overlooked reasons why Western leaders often support non-democratic leaders such as Meles Zenawi of Ethiopia and Paul Kagame of Rwanda. We have presented a number of observations supporting this argument.

First, the two leaders brought peace through skilful warfare. This warfare did not continue, but introduced Hobbesian Peace in war-torn countries. In the case of Paul Kagame a deviation from this was detected in 2012, when it was widely concluded that Rwanda supported Tutsi rebels in Eastern Congo, in contradiction of Western norms. This also resulted in a freezing of development aid from leading donors in the West – at least during a brief period, until Rwanda reversed its policy. Similar action by Zenawi – using force to repress Al-Shabab militants in neighbouring Somalia – did not, however, transgress against the norms of Western donors, since that militia is considered to be a destabilizing force linked to the international terrorist group Al-Qaeda. Thus Zenawi was supported and indeed rewarded by Western powers on this question. However, being skilful commanders, both Kagame and Zenawi could well be compared with our two 18th century examples of “enlightened despots”, particularly Frederick II.

Secondly, the two leaders introduced more efficient government by adhering to several themes of the general Western development discourse: focusing on macro-economic stability, economic growth, confronting corruption, allowing and encouraging foreign investment, protecting private property, inviting modernization via IT and agricultural reform. These are all themes that represent “credible commitments” from the government vis-à-vis the citizens and incoming investors. The same goes for the focus on education, developing the health sector, bringing down child mortality and – in Rwanda – enabling women to achieve high levels of representation in parliament. Taken together these factors represent an “inclusive” institutional build-up, similar also to the enlightenment “state building” ideas of Cameralism in Prussia, and indeed the practices by both Gustaf III of Sweden and Frederick II of Prussia in modernizing and rationalizing their states.

A third point is that the two leaders have shown conspicuous intellectual qualities. Given the circumstances in which they grew up, they have made the most of their education and shown a clear intellectual commitment to development ideas and norms that to a large extent is shared with the West, including, in the case of Rwanda, the world’s most extensive female representation in Parliament. Their intellectual virtues have also been evident in reports that they “have an agenda”; and that they are not “routine despots”. As we have noted, this agenda was indeed even developed in close contact with Western intellectuals. Anecdotes involving indications of punctuality, seriousness of effort,

intellectual curiosity, being “soft spoken” and showing intelligence put them on a par not only with the image most Western leaders would have of themselves, but also with many similar anecdotes surrounding our emblematic “philosopher kings” of the enlightenment era.

A fourth item is that the two leaders Kagame and Zenawi emerge as shrewd and very capable politicians, being “masterful in dealing with Western governments”, “captivating foreign donors” (Zenawi) but also highly capable of achievements such as introducing conciliation courts and organising communal work (Kagame, as cited by Clinton above). In this they clearly conform to the Western political norm for a modern leader, as opposed to the “old” type of neo-patrimonial African political leaders, devoted to the “politics of the belly”.²⁴ Again, they may be despots, but not “routine despots”. Here we find a correspondence with Western leaders – as they perceive themselves – and the skilful, rational politics pursued by both Gustaf III and Frederick II.

Point number five is that anecdotes point to the personal modesty and simplicity of habit of the two leaders: dressing down for leisure, taking part in common sports, not enriching themselves – “no private jets, Paris homes or yachts”. In line with this is the prudent and at the same time self-assertive goal, expressed by Kagame, of eventually dispensing with aid. This may not directly correspond to the royal status and splendid courts of our enlightened monarchs of the 18th century, but both monarchs were eager to give the impression that they wanted to connect with commoners, as is underlined by a number of anecdotes and episodes.

A sixth element relates to the suppression of political rights in both Rwanda and Ethiopia during the reign of Kagame and Zenawi. We noted, in relation to Stephen Kinzer’s discussion about freedom and the need for security in Rwanda under Kagame, that there are strong resemblances here with the discourse on “moderate constraints” in Prussia under Frederick II and also with the authoritarian regime introduced by Gustaf III in Sweden. This could, under an enlightened sovereign, create scope for people to “expand to the fullness of their power”, according to the interpretation made by Immanuel Kant. This is also an important and recurring argument for the West’s support for autocratic leaders such as Kagame and Zenawi, as exemplified by the statements by the British Ambassador, Jeremy Macadie, cited above. In this context it is worth reiterating that some of the most important contemporary development goals and indexes focus solely on material “output” – we have cited the Human Development Index and the UN millennium goals – with no mention of democracy. This underlines the separation, both in the modern development

24 I refer here to African politicians as described by Bayart (1993) and to the neo-patrimonial structure of leadership described by Bratton and van der Walle (1994) and leaders using non-development or “disorder” for personal advantage as described by Chabal and Daloz (1999).

discourse and in the discourse of the “enlightened despots” of the 18th century, between development and democracy.

We have found this separation also in the practical policies in the West towards the two countries and the two leaders examined here. Though there has been strong criticism of them in the media, from academics and NGOs, as regards human rights and the treatment of the political opposition it has not resulted in the withdrawal of development aid or other support from the West. That only happened in Rwanda when Kagame was perceived to defy the norm of basic Hobbesian peace in Eastern Congo in 2012.

Levisky and Way have argued that closeness to the West – in particular to the USA and the European Union – is an important factor behind authoritarian regimes turning democratic. In the two cases examined here – both close to the West if measured as recipients of development aid and political support – this seems not to be the case. They also argued that organisational capacity increases the odds for democratization. The organizational capacity of at least Rwanda has been one reason why it has been favoured by the West, but it has not made it democratic.

What we have seen here is that if, in a developing country, there is present an intelligent and educated leader, if that person presents an “enlightened” development agenda and prospects of an “output” that conforms with Western norms – then it is very likely that Western governments will support that leader, even if he shows a considerable deficit in the areas of political rights and democracy.

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Appendix

Table A 1. The countries in Africa that received most Overseas Development Aid (ODA) on a bilateral basis 2007-2011 in absolute terms (column 2) and in relative terms – i.e. ODA as per cent of the GNI of the respective recipient country – (columns 6), and their respective scorings on Freedom House Political Rights index and the Polity IV index. The former index is more of a political “output” index, describing the actual rights present for the citizen, whereas the Polity IV index is more descriptive of the type of regime and its procedures. Please note that in the Freedom house ranking 7 indicates least political rights, and 1 indicates a maximum; in the Polity IV index 10 indicates a regime which is “strongly democratic” and -10 corresponds to a regime that is “strongly autocratic”.

(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)
Country	Av ODA per year in million USD 2007-11	FH Political Rights	Polity IV	Country	ODA as per cent of GNI 2007-2011	FH Political Rights	Polity IV
Cameroon	229	6,0	-4,0	Liberia	106,6	3,0	6,0
Egypt	146	6,0	-2,8	Burundi	31,0	4,4	6,0
Liberia	103	3,0	6,0	Congo Kinshasa	28,2	5,8	5,0
South Africa	97	2,0	9,0	Mozambique	20,9	3,6	5,0
Ethiopia	94	5,4	1,0	Rwanda	19,2	6,0	-3,4
Kenya	94	4,0	7,4	Sierra Leone	18,8	3,0	7,0
Tanzania	94	3,6	-1,0	Malawi	18,3	3,4	6,0
Botswana	90	2,6	8,0	Guinea-Bissau	16,1	4,0	6,0
Mozambique	84	3,6	5,0	Cape Verde	14,8	1,0	10,0
Morocco	82	5,0	-5,6	Djibouti	13,3	5,4	2,0
Congo Kinshasa	75	5,8	5,0	Gambia	13,2	5,2	-5,0
Ghana	69	1,0	8,0	Tanzania	13,1	3,6	-1,0
Uganda	50	5,0	-1,0	Ethiopia	12,9	5,4	1,0
Burkina Faso	46	5,0	0,0	Mali	12,4	2,0	7,0
Mali	45	2,0	7,0	C Afr Republic	12,3	5,0	-1,0
Zambia	43	3,0	6,6	Burkina Faso	12,0	5,0	0,0
Benin	41	2,0	7,0	Togo	12,0	5,0	3,2
Sudan	40	7,0	3,2	Niger	11,6	3,8	3,6
Rwanda	37	6,0	-3,4	Uganda	11,6	5,0	-1,0
Namibia	35	2,0	6,0	Zimbabwe	11,0	6,4	-1,0
Average	80	4,0	3,1	Average	20,5	4,3	2,8

Source: Freedom House, Center for Systemic Peace (Polity IV), World Data Bank / World Development Indicators. “Aid flows” website.