David Lewis June 9th, 2025

Towards a development humanities

***Professor David Lewis** makes a case for a new field of Development Humanities (DH): the idea of widening the scope of development studies beyond just economics and the other social sciences to engage more with the arts and humanities. He argues that building new interdisciplinary bridges can be useful for research, teaching and practice.*

I began the past academic year with a grand plan. Having been granted a precious sabbatical year I was going to write a book. The idea had been percolating for some time, on the theme of how development policy makers often forget or ignore the past.

A few weeks into my sabbatical my sister suddenly became ill and passed away, reminding me that however much we may try to plan and organise our professional lives, the personal is never very far away. Attending to family was now the priority for the foreseeable future. Writing the book now seemed too much of a challenge. Instead, I turned to a smaller and more manageable task, which was to turn a lecture on the humanities that I had been giving to my Development Studies MSc students during the past few years into a short paper.

The paper makes a case for a new field of Development Humanities (DH): the idea of widening the scope of development studies beyond just economics and the other social sciences to engage more with the arts and humanities. I argue that building new interdisciplinary bridges can be useful for research, teaching and practice.

Opening up development studies

Development studies is already a diverse field, but DH opens it up further so that themes can be critically explored and imagined in new ways. For example, DH would pay attention to the moral and ethical dimensions of uncertainty and change. It would engage with the dehumanizing effects of

reductivism, commercialization and resurgent techno-optimism. It would also provide new space for non-Western viewpoints and decolonization narratives.

The idea follows earlier work on popular culture and representation in development (with Dennis Rodgers and Michael Woolcock) and also responds to the recent emergence of other synthetic fields such as Environmental Humanities and Medical Humanities.

Development Humanities would challenge the commonly assumed binary of 'sciences versus arts' debates – that we need either 'fact' or 'emotion' to understand the world. 'Science' is an important frame through which to understand the world, but it is not the only one and has arguably become over-dominant. More balance is needed.

But the aim would not be to create a cosy niche field in which we refer to our favourite novels, songs or films to simply add flavour to 'real' research. A 'radical interdisciplinarity' will be needed if we are to transcend simplistic ideas about 'humanizing' development.

Expanding our thinking

To illustrate the potential, let me briefly elaborate on how ideas from the humanities are beginning to expand my own thinking as I slowly return to work on my 'policy amnesia' book, which centres on the history of flood control interventions in Bangladesh.

My argument draws on the work of Bangladeshi economist Dr S. Nazrul Islam, founder of the Bangladesh Environment Network, who has argued that repeated externally driven policy efforts to control rivers for more than a century have simply made flood problems worse.

These misguided flood control policies of the past have aimed to control rather than respect rivers. The construction of embankments over many decades of 'cordon' infrastructure interventions has reduced the space for water to spread, as have poorly designed roads, bridges, and culverts, creating bottlenecks for the passage of water and contributing to the worsening of floods in many areas.

Rather than trying to dominate nature, he and many others have argued policy makers should follow the evidence that points to the need for more 'open' forms of river management that respect the power and centrality of our rivers to nature and society.

As I write and reflect on these ideas, nature writer and professor of literature Robert Macfarlane's book *Is A River Alive?* is being serialized on BBC Radio 4, making the argument that modernity's insistence on seeing rivers as resources to be exploited rather than living entities lies at the heart of our contemporary environmental malaise and he convincingly advances the idea that rivers have rights.

Such ideas also resonate with the novel I am currently reading – Elif Shafak's (2024) *There Are Rivers in the Sky*, about the politics of water. Cumbersome at times but highly engaging, this

complex and ambitious novel moves between ancient Mesopotamia, a Yazidi community on the banks of the Tigris, the lives of semi-destitute 'mudlarks' in Victorian London, and a contemporary hydrologist living on a Thames houseboat. The novel reflects on global inequality by tracing the ways that water connects us across history with a plot that engages with a wide range of development issues including power, conflict, and climate science.

Novelists are often interdisciplinary readers and Shafak draws on a detailed knowledge of history, physics and emotional intelligence in this book (Sam McLoughlin, Rest Less, April 28, 2025). 'Fiction,' Shafak says, 'is not an unreal escape. Just the opposite. I think it brings us closer to the truth of our lives'.

As creative works, novels of course seek to do more than just cover a list of 'issues' – they are imaginative tools through which the reader is both entertained and invited to see the world differently and ask new questions, such as 'who owns the past'? Elif Shafak: 'I think the novel is the antidote to the impatience and extreme polarization of our era … The long form has an ability to hold nuance, multiplicity and pluralism inside'.

Where to next?

We live in an age in which it often feels that our imagination has become increasingly limited by economism and technology, despite their obvious benefits. In their new book *Reimagining Development* Peter Sutoris and Uma Pradhan make a strong case for reimagining development as a moral idea – more human-centred, less Western-centric and more politically grounded and sensitive to history. (Full disclosure, I was honoured to be asked to write the Afterword). Development Humanities has the potential to contribute to their agenda of 'radical humility' and could also help to make development ideas more inclusive.

Where to next? Many leading universities in the UK and elsewhere currently offer Masters programmes in Environmental Humanities, including Durham, Bristol and Warwick. I propose that we begin exploring a similar initiative in relation to Development Humanities. We could start with establishing an interdisciplinary network or research group to discuss viability. Please get in touch if you are interested.

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