“Laudatio” to Robert Chambers,
Winner Of The Developing Countries Award 1993,
Justus-Liebig University, Giessen, Germany,
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Simon Maxwell

Professor Bauer,
Dr Brantner,
Mr Hardtl,
Ladies and Gentlemen

Let me first apologise for my discourtesy in being forced to make these remarks in English. I would much have preferred to have spoken in German. However, the spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak.

I am delighted on my own behalf and on behalf of the Institute of Development Studies, to present to you my friend and colleague Robert Chambers. We feel particularly honoured by this award, because Robert and I have just spent three fascinating days with Professor Thimm and his colleagues at Schloss Rauischolzhausen, discussing food security and infrastructure. We have had the opportunity to see the depth, range and quality of development studies in Germany. This makes us realise the especial honour that is being paid to Robert Chambers in making this award.

It is, I must say, rather a daunting job, being asked to speak about Robert Chambers. There is a great deal to say. I am reminded of the experience of then Governor Bill Clinton, when given the task of nominating Michael Dukakis as presidential candidate during the Democratic Primary for the American presidential election of 1988. He spoke for a very long time and earned applause only once: when he reached the end and announced "finally ...". I shall try not to repeat this error.

What I would like to do in the next few minutes is to take you by the hand and lead you into Robert Chambers country. First, we will climb the nearest hill for a bird’s eye view of the country. We will see a view that is craggy, untamed, sometimes a little wild. It is very suitable that we should have made this climb, however, because Robert's great passion in life is rock climbing. Indeed, when we arrived at Schloss Rauischolzhausen, I had the greatest difficulty in preventing him from reaching his room, not by climbing the stairs like
everyone else, but by scaling the outside wall! Many of you may think that Robert Chambers' main claim to a place in history is in the field of development studies. This is quite untrue. He is known principally for his rock climbing exploits and for having pioneered a number of new routes up Mount Kenya. Indeed, one often meets old residents of Kenya, who, when asked about Robert Chambers, will remark "ah yes, Chambers, the rock climbing chap!".

But we are running ahead. If we truly want to understand Robert Chambers country, we must look not only at the superficial view, but also try to understand the forces that have shaped the landscape: the layers of experience, the themes, the ambiguities. That will be our second task. In so doing, we should follow Robert himself and be careful to avoid over-simplification and reductionism. I would like us to celebrate the complexity, the diversity, the risk-taking that are inherent in Robert's work.

**The view from the hill**

Let me start, then, with the view. I would like to start with the infant Chambers; at least not quite the infant, but with the year 1949, when Robert gained an open scholarship to Cambridge University to read natural sciences. It is interesting to observe that Robert emerged six years later, with a degree not in natural sciences, but in history. Here we have a first indication, I think, of the attitude to authority which has been characteristic of Robert Chambers throughout his career!

Having left Cambridge, Robert joined the government service in Kenya, in the last days of British rule, first as a District Officer in Samburu and later in a variety of teaching posts. I hope he will tell you himself of some of his experiences during that time, which laid the foundation for his early work on rural development. But perhaps he will not mention another of his mountaineering exploits. On the day of Kenya's independence in 1963, when the crowds gathered in the stadium to celebrate, the night sky was illuminated by a distant flare, marking the raising of Kenya's new, independent flag on the country's highest point, the summit of Mount Kenya. The flag was raised, of course, by a national of Kenya. But the man who organised the expedition and ensured its success was Robert Chambers.

Robert's early work on rural development continued in Kenya, and briefly at the Universities of Manchester and Glasgow. However, in 1972, he was captured by the Institute of Development Studies, where he has now been one of our brightest stars for twenty years. Of course, you would not expect Robert to let the grass grow under his feet and the period has been marked by several long-term periods of residence in developing countries, particularly in India.

This period has been fertile for Robert. He has now produced more than twenty major pieces of work, including ten books, more than most of us could expect to produce in several lifetimes. He has also produced more than 110 other pieces of academic work,
mostly in the form of articles in the professional journals. This is, indeed, a very substantial body of work. And in it, we can see the breadth and diversity of Robert's contribution to development studies. His early book on managing rural development. His work on indigenous technical knowledge, leading into rapid rural appraisal and, now, participatory rural appraisal. Books on seasonality, on canal irrigation, on trees, on agricultural research. And, of course, his very well known book on rural development "Rural Development: Putting the last first" now in its eleventh printing. There is other work too, on agricultural research, on poverty, on drought relief, on the role of the state. And Robert's new book, "Challenging the Professions", due to be published this summer.

As we can see, the view from the top of our hill is full of rich detail, it illustrates the scope of Robert Chambers' work. I do commend these books to you. Robert writes better than anyone I know. He has contributed to the language of development studies many fine phrases which challenge the way we think and urge us to behave differently: 'putting the last first', 'sustainable livelihood thinking', 'the parsimonious paradigm for agricultural research', 'the self-deceiving state', 'professional reversals', 'baskets not packages of new technologies for farmers'. If I may paraphrase Wittgenstein, Robert would surely agree that "everything that can be said, can be said memorably".

**A closer look at the landscape**

Let me now turn to the landscape and take up some of the themes which have imbued Robert Chambers' work over the years. I would like to cite three of these.

**Poverty**

The first theme is poverty. In 1993, poverty is again back on the international agenda, thanks to the World Bank's "World Development Report" of 1990, the UNDP's "Human Development Report" of the same year, and many other international initiatives. However, it has not always been so. During the 1980s, the concern with poverty was subordinated to structural adjustment and macro-economic stabilization. Robert, rightly, carried a torch for poverty throughout this period, constantly reminding us of the basic mission of our development profession.

However, Robert's vision of poverty is not the poverty of simple GDP figures or poverty lines. He has focused always on the individuals who underly the statistics: on their isolation, their powerlessness, their vulnerability to shocks like illness, their coping strategies. He has emphasised that the poor are found mostly in environments which are complex, diverse and risk prone, the so called CDR environments. He has reminded us that there is a pronounced seasonal pattern to poverty in the developing world.

It follows that when Robert Chambers has sought solutions to poverty, he has focused not simply on increasing income, but rather on the empowerment of the poor, on a reduction in
their vulnerability, on helping them to exploit the diversity of their environments. In brief, Robert has sought, on behalf of the poor, secure and sustainable livelihoods.

Others, of course, have seen parts of this whole. However, Robert Chambers has been a leader in putting the complexity of the picture together and in holding to it consistently over the years.

Listening

The second theme in Robert’s work that I wish to stress follows from the first. It is about "listening" and the importance of empowering poor people themselves in seeking solutions to their poverty. This theme emerged early in Robert’s work, in his research on indigenous technical knowledge, and in the question "whose knowledge counts?". It was developed in his work on rapid rural appraisal and is now the dominant theme of his work on participatory rural appraisal. This represents an astonishing contribution to development studies, which is beginning to revolutionise the way that research is carried out. As we saw at Schloss Raiescholzhausen only the other day, researchers and policy makers are spellbound when Robert presents this material: villagers themselves making maps, building models, ranking alternatives, preparing matrices, time lines or pie charts. Another of Robert’s phrases is relevant here, "poor people can do it": as a result of Robert’s work, professionals are having to rethink their role in rural development.

Robert would be the first to say that PRA is a movement with many members and that its growth is the result of a collective effort. However, I think that none of us who work in the field would deny Robert’s pivotal role, not as a father figure, that would be too authoritarian a position, but rather as a teacher and a guide.

It is perhaps worth pointing out that the approach which Robert Chambers is now propagating is characteristically inductive and not deductive, building up from experience, rather than building down from theory. I am reminded of Goethe, who said, "all theory is grey, but the golden tree of actual life springs ever green". This seems an appropriate image, not least because Robert himself has stressed the role of trees as assets for the poor, which provide buffers against destitution.

Of course, this is not always so. In 1987, we suffered a severe hurricane in England, which in three counties alone, Sussex, Kent and Surrey, destroyed some 30 million trees. I well remember cowering under the bed with my wife and children in the middle of the night, alert to the sound of falling trees and expecting the house to collapse at any moment. I turned on the radio for information and found the BBC World Service. And clear across the howling of the wind came the voice of Robert Chambers, explaining to the BBC’s audience the value of trees as indestructable assets and a form of social insurance!
Rethinking the state

There is a third theme in Robert’s work which I should like to emphasise today. That is about the importance of going beyond thought and analysis, to action. Robert once wrote that "scientists are trained to act, and social scientists to criticise". For most of us, this is probably all too true. Robert, however, has never shied away from policy. What he has done, though, is to emphasise the limitations of state action. This is not a simple, neo-liberal prescription, which relies on the virtues of the market. Robert has, instead, built up a picture of the ways in which the state can make things worse for poor people, for example by imposing very high transactions costs on the selling of trees, or through mal-administration of irrigation systems.

Robert has argued that the role of the state is not to provide simple, technical solutions to poor people, but rather to provide opportunities and offer choices. This is exemplified in his work on agricultural research, where he argues that what farmers need are not "packages of practices" prescribed by agronomists, but rather "baskets of choices" from which they can choose. It was Bismark who said that "politics is not an exact science". Policy is not an exact science either and the task is to encourage diversity. In this sense, Robert Chambers is a post-modernist. I wonder whether Bismark, perhaps, can be considered the first post-modernist?

Conclusion: making the heart beat faster

Let me come to my conclusion. Finally. We have looked at the view and we have studied the landscape of Robert Chambers. There is one important feature of the landscape, however, which remains. That is that running through everything I have said about Robert Chambers’ work is a passion and a sense of excitement. Nietzsche encouraged us to live dangerously. Robert once said to me that you must "do what makes your heart beat faster". I find that one way to make my heart beat faster is to be with Robert Chambers. I am proud to be in some senses, not all of course, but many, a disciple of Robert Chambers. I hope that when you listen to Robert Chambers your hearts, too, will beat a little faster. Ladies and gentlemen, I am proud to present to you, Robert Chambers.

Giessen, Germany

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