Responsibility is a critical component of Amartya Sen’s consequentialist capability approach to development. I stress the fact that Sen’s view is a form of consequentialism, because as he correctly notes consequentialism is notorious for not taking responsibilities any more seriously than it has taken rights seriously. He believes that the consequentialism that he offers takes both responsibilities and human rights seriously. However, Sen’s theory of development as freedom still comes up short as an ethic of development that includes shared responsibilities for mass violence. In these brief remarks I will outline Sen’s account of responsibility and explain why I think that it follows from his conception of development as freedom. Then, I will present an alternative account of responsibility that rests upon another simile: development as democratic political education.

Where Sen would have us aspire towards “development as freedom,” I suggest that development is better understood as a form of democratic political education. Democratic political education has a very broad meaning for me, including an understanding of the complex relations between education, culture, and economics. It is not just an education about the cherished goods that citizens hold in common or loyalty to the state. Democratic political education is also an education about power and complicity in the mass violence that accompanies the processes that generate power.

I begin this paper with a hypothetical case, Jim in the Grand Marché, inspired by Bernard Williams’s famous case of Jim and the Indians, but written to highlight certain complexities about responsibility that Williams and Sen both under-estimate. I conclude by returning to the case of Jim in the Grand Marché in order to see if the notion of development as democratic political education addresses the questions about responsibility this case raises in a more satisfactory way.

The case of Jim in the Grand Marché

Jim is leading the first-ever study abroad program to a very poor country in West Africa. The title of his program is Ethics and Development in West Africa. He has ten undergraduate students from several universities in the United States, none of whom has been to a country like this before. The program lasts two months, and most of the time the students study ethical problems that arise in agriculture, education, and visual culture. Among the sites they visit are an agricultural research station 50 km. outside the capital.
city where scientists are experimenting with new strains of drought resistant sorghum, a community school that emphasizes instruction in native languages, and an artists’ collective that provides apprenticeship programs for unemployed youth while trying to market contemporary textile art and consumer goods that are based on traditional patterns using traditional techniques and materials.

The program is based in the capital city, and students live in a conference center located in a quiet, relatively prosperous neighborhood twenty minutes away from the city center and its bustling market, the grand marché. After the first week during which Jim was very careful not to let the students, eight women and two men, wander off on their own to explore the city, he agreed to take six of them shopping in the grand marché. They would also have to change money and he was told there was one ATM in the city that accepted VISA debit cards.

After hailing two cabs and negotiating the fare for the group of seven, Jim’s caravan set off across the bridge that separated their neighborhood from the city center. Traffic moved at its customary unpredictable pace, scattering pedestrians one minute, stalled for apparently no reason in a roundabout the next. The closer they got to the grand marché, the slower the trucks and cars moved and the more daring the motorbikes became. The drive itself was a lesson in the ethics of development. It was clear that the capital city is strained well beyond capacity. Its infrastructure is not equipped to handle the large number of residents who have migrated from the countryside over the last twenty years. Small children rushed the taxis at every chance, trying to sell telephone calling cards and mangoes. Adults watched from the curb where they were selling large, multicolored plastic tubs used for washing, cooking, and eating; similarly multi-colored teapots that were used for boiling water or for toileting; walls of fabric; and assorted small household items. Children who were not selling, were either sleeping on the side of the road or leading disabled, older adults through the traffic begging for small change. It was noontime in the middle of the week. Except for Jim and his students, there seemed to be no other foreigners and certainly no white tourists to be seen. Jim knew, however, that many of the people in the street were immigrants from other West African countries who had fled the civil wars there. As inhospitable and impoverished as this capital city was, it was politically stable politically for the moment.

Jim’s taxi drivers did not know exactly where the ATM machine was, but they did know the grand marché. So, without much local currency and slightly nauseous from the exhaust pollution, Jim and his charges disembarked ready to browse and anxious to find the machine that would take their VISA cards. They got lucky, and after only fifteen minutes in the hot, muggy, and muddy streets lined by open sewers on either side an elderly tailor pointed to a large, stone-faced building across the street from his makeshift stall on the edge of the market. The ATM was obviously working since there was a line of approximately 10 customers (mostly African women in colorful and well-ironed dresses) standing outside the small booth that housed it. Jim and his students crossed the busy street and one by one they withdrew the daily max: $200 in local currency. Their good fortune did not go unnoticed.
As they crossed back to the grand marché they were met by Moussa and Fakara, two tall African men in their mid-twenties who spoke enough English to offer their services as guides through the grand marché. Jim was immediately skeptical, but he knew from experience how easy it is to get lost in the grand marché. He tried to negotiate a price in advance for the services of these two free-lancers, but there was some confusion and the students were clearly very anxious to get out of the traffic and begin shopping. Before he knew it, they were shopping.

After two hours wandering through the grand marché, the students were weighed down with overpriced jewelry, small wood carvings, and other non-essentials. They were also very tired and hungry. Moussa and Fakara offered to take them to a small restaurant that served Western food. After a half-hour trek into one of the neighborhoods bordering the grand marché, they ended up in a small cul-de-sac with no restaurant in sight. Residents on the street looked with amusement at this group of bedraggled white foreigners, hugging their backpacks to their chests, hanging on to their new purchases, hoping to find a piece of dry ground to sit on, and clearly unhappy. When Jim asked Moussa and Fakara what they planned to do now, the two guides shrugged and said the restaurant must have closed. They wanted their fee, they said, because they had to return home. They said the fee was $50 per person for the two hour tour, or $350.

Jim was stunned. He thought they had said between $30 and $50 total for the tour. His students were on a shoestring budget, as was he. He had no idea, really, where they were at this point, and he was worried about the health, not just the physical safety of the students. He feared that if he refused to pay the fee, then at best Moussa and Fakara would not help them find their way back to a street where they could get taxis back across the river. He didn’t want to think about what else they might do. It was mid-afternoon, the call for prayer could be heard in the distance over a loudspeaker.

What should Jim do? He could tell his students that for their own personal health and safety it was best to pay the exorbitant fee. But he wasn’t sure how Moussa and Fakara would respond. They were clearly in no mood to bargain and there were getting visibly angry at this point. He could start looking for directions among the local residents. But it was prayer time and even before that, he had sensed that they were not especially interested in his troupe. This was not the grand marché, and they had very little to sell to the students. Or, he could try to convince the students that this was a “teachable moment,” especially in a program focusing on ethics and development. They should think of it as an immersion activity just like the ones they would have at the agricultural research station, the community school, and the artists’ collective. It was well-worth the fee Moussa and Fakara were charging. In fact, as relatively wealthy foreigners they could certainly afford this special, if unplanned, excursion.

- What is Jim’s responsibility?
- What is the difference, if any, between his individual responsibility and social responsibility?
Development as Freedom

Sen avoids the criticism of post-development theorists that theories of development have constructed (and perpetuated) the very problems they claim to be solving by treating the problem of poverty as a contextual matter of capability deprivation, not absolute low per capita income. What is really at stake, according to Sen, is not some fixed minimum income, the poverty line, but rather a notion of “poverty as human capabilities,” on which there are many influences, not just low income.

Human capabilities, argue Sen, Nussbaum, and others, include things such as being able to live a normal lifespan; enjoy good health; move freely from place to place; think, see, and imagine what one chooses; form emotional attachments; formulate a view of the good life; associate with others freely; and participate in the political and material culture of one’s society. What it takes to realize these capabilities will vary considerably from culture to culture, even if the capabilities themselves are nearly universally valued. What is critical for Sen is not just that one has the opportunity to realize these capabilities, but that to a reasonable degree one can achieve some reasonable mix of them. He describes this as being able to convert capabilities to actual “functionings.”

“Development as freedom” refers to the enhancement of “the ability – the substantive freedom – of people to lead the lives they have reason to value and enhance the real choices they have.” Freedom in this sense is not the formal opportunity to exercise one’s freedom of choice. It refers to a person’s capability to function in certain ways, and this may require different resources for different people depending upon their initial endowments and circumstances. A single measure like income is not sensitive enough to pick out these differences. “For example,” Sen writes, “being relatively poor in a rich community can prevent a person from achieving some elementary ‘functionings’ (such as taking part in the life of the community) even though her income, in absolute terms, may be much higher than the level of income at which members of poorer communities can function with great ease and success.” Development, therefore, is “a process of expanding substantive freedoms that people have” in context.

Sen’s use of the simile, “development as freedom,” is significant. When Rawls coined the phrase “justice as fairness,” he meant that the justice of involuntary political arrangements that we are born into should not be measured solely in terms of their outcomes, but rather they should primarily be judged on the fairness of their procedures. In this way they ought to be as similar to voluntary games as they can be. There should be reciprocity between the ‘players’ and there should be a set of rules that encourages a ‘good play of the game’, not just a slugfest or a tedious pitchers’ duel. Like its Rawlsian precursor for self-sufficient nation states, development as freedom does not mean that development and freedom are identical. They are similar in the relevant respects.

My reading of the simile “development as freedom” is that development should not be understood as a process that achieves certain preconceived just outcomes such as a more equal income distribution or more equal need satisfaction. Instead, we should try to structure the development of interdependent societies in such a way that they allow their citizens to make social choices in the same substantively free way that fully
functioning human beings might make their own free choices. Development should create the appropriate conditions for the practical and voluntary realization of human capabilities across societies, not just within a society as a whole.

**Responsibility**

Who is responsible for this kind of global development as freedom? The answer for Sen is, ultimately, individual situated consequentialists.

Sen’s theory of capabilities is a theory of individual substantive freedom, and he says that this kind of freedom is a prerequisite for responsible human agency. Individuals who are substantively free will be able to make responsible choices, that is, sound judgments about their own wellbeing. Furthermore, individuals who are substantively free can be and ought to be held responsible for their choices. It is this second sense of being responsible *for* one’s choices (as opposed to being capable of making responsible choices to do certain things) that is critical.

Sen argues that individuals are not to be held responsible for impersonally maximizing their own utility or total utility. That kind of consequentialism does not capture how people actually make moral decisions, and so we shouldn’t try to force them to choose this way. Instead, they can and ought to view the world from their own position as “situated consequentialists” for whom a picture of a good state of affairs simultaneously includes rights, duties, and conceptions of the person. Such situated individuals are responsible for respecting human rights, honoring perfect and imperfect duties, and furthering human wellbeing.

The demand of situated evaluation requires that a person not ignore the particular position from which she is making the choice. Consider, for example, the parent of a child for whom she is choosing a particular baby food. The requirement of situated evaluation does not, in any way, vindicate smugness about one’s contingent level of ignorance, and does not deny the need for the person to find out, if reasonably possible, more about what others know or see (for example, that the baby food with which the parent is familiar might have been shown to be harmful). Nor does it deny the relevance of broader sympathies (for example, a parent may well ask whether it is right that her child should have the benefit of some baby food to which other children do not have access). What is denied is the possibility of ignoring the person’s own responsibilities in her particular situation, in this case that of being a parent of this child.

Parents can be held responsible for negligence when they fail to know and act on knowledge they reasonably ought to have had. That is what it means to be a responsible parent in a particular situation. This responsibility, Sen asserts, does not preclude a parent questioning the rightness of the social distribution of baby food, even if that might mean less food for her own baby. The individual responsibility for one’s own baby’s wellbeing should not “deny the relevance” of having sympathy for the wellbeing of babies in general who have less baby food than one’s own. Depending, presumably,
upon the urgent needs of other less well-fed babies, an imperfect duty to aid others could override a parent’s responsibility to feed her own baby the most nutritious food. This would not be negligence, and using the simile of development as freedom, the same reasoning ought to apply to the shared responsibilities of peoples across national boundaries.10

If we are concerned with the question of responsibility for harm done to the children of others and not just the responsibility of the parent to provide for her own child, then Sen’s account of responsibility (and negligence) is not enough. He tells us we should not neglect our own children, and we can do this without losing sympathy for those who may suffer because they have less than our own children. What about those children and their families who cannot afford the available baby food for more complex reasons, whether we purchase a lot of baby food for our own children or not? There seems to be a much more complex relationship between the effective demand of the poor for food for their children, the nutrition and health of poor children, and their substantive freedom in general than simply how strong our “sympathies” toward them may be in comparison to the motivational basis of our situated evaluations of our responsibilities to feed our own children.

This individualism in Sen’s account of responsibility is surprising given that Sen is well aware of the fact that substantive human freedom, including the freedom of poor children, depends in large part on social arrangements that individuals separately have little control over.11 Gender relations within the family and the political organization of women, for example, not just affordability of baby food for poor families, may affect the actual health of babies.12 In the same article in which he describes the individual responsibilities of the situated consequentialist, Sen writes,

The need to examine the relative importance of different consequences (including well-beings, freedoms, rights, and so on) that may compete with each other in evaluative assessment does arise in many different contexts. We live in an interdependent world in which the realization of our respective freedoms interconnects in a variety of ways, and we cannot treat them each as an isolated island. The discipline of consequential evaluation forces us to take responsibility for our choices, since our actions influence other people’s freedoms and lives as well as our own. The reach of our responsibility includes asking certain questions such as those concerning the relative importance of different rights or freedoms the realization of which may impinge on each other.13

What is noteworthy about this acute analysis of our “interdependent world” is that “our responsibility,” as Sen calls it, is not equally interdependent. When it comes to social responsibility, Sen warns us that

Any affirmation of social responsibility that replaces individual responsibility cannot but be, to varying extents, counterproductive. There is no substitute for individual responsibility.14
This seems like an odd formulation for someone who has written so eloquently on public action and the need for it to provide communication, health, education, and transportation infrastructure to avoid famine and hunger. Aren’t those social responsibilities? And when professionals organize to form groups such as Physicians for Social Responsibility, are they counterproductively substituting social responsibility for individual responsibility? Wouldn’t it be more accurate to say that they are acting more responsibly by recognizing the need for collective action and shared social responsibility? Just as some actions lead to a complex pattern of effects, so too do some actions stem from a complex web of causes and antecedent conditions that cannot be reduced to a single line of individual responsibility.

A people can incur legitimate social responsibilities for the capability deprivation of others, regardless of perfect and imperfect individual duties. This is what development is very often about. That is, it is reconstructive and conciliatory development, not merely humanitarian aid, to remedy the mass violence that has been generated in complex patterns over time and that continue into the present. Development within the interconnected global context Sen himself describes presupposes some notion of complicity. Part of the individual and shared social responsibilities of democratic citizens in this context is to make educated choices about the constitution of power and the patterns of violence that development simultaneously creates.

**Development as democratic political education: Causation and Intention**

The main idea underlying the simile, development as democratic political education, is that individuals who are part of a democratic society can and should learn how to make educated choices among the alternative paths of development open to them and that they share with others, not just the immediate members of their own democratic society. This responsibility derives not from their individual substantive freedom but from their complicity in the structures of power and patterns of violence that make possible the substantive freedoms of others and their own substantive freedom at the same time. Development as democratic political education is for those, rich and poor, who aspire to a more democratic politics within these structures of power and patterns of violence. Responsibility for this kind of development cannot be captured with familiar images of good parenting that abstract from actual relationships of complicity and cooperation.

When power is deployed, either by the state or by other institutions, it will inevitably entail violence. The violence can be couched in administrative rulings and legal judgments, or it can emerge overtly in police and military action. It can be delegated by the state to other organizations who will act in its name, or it arises outside the sphere of state power where it is exercised by professionals, experts, and other authority figures. Like power, violence can take many forms. It can invade and violate the body. It can cut us off from one another, demonize the other, and alienate us from what Emerson called our “attainable selves.”
Whether it is state power and the exercise of legitimate violence, as Weber described, or it is power operating independently of the state producing other more subtle and infectious forms of violence, the general point is the same. Democratic political societies depend upon at the same time that they spawn a web of power and violence that includes state power and official violence but is not limited to them. Feminist theories have been instrumental in showing us how to break out of the narrow Weberian state-centered framework and have uncovered the operations of power and violence in patriarchal family and sexual relations. Foucault and other discourse theorists have done the same for our understanding of professional authority.

This same interdependence of power and violence that defines democratic political society also has defined development as a process of social, economic, and political growth that trades on a misleading organic growth metaphor. Development has not occurred without large artificial structures of power moving it forward. These structures can be states, but they can be equally large multilateral organizations and multinational corporations. They also can be local organizations that have a broad base and high levels of participation. Regardless of how development is organized, like democratic institutions, these structures also entail violence. Choices must be made, eligibility criteria set, and rations distributed. Whether this is done in a top-down or middle-out way, the power that drives development also leads to violence. Sometimes it is violence toward outsiders, but often it is the violence that must be done to enforce the new norms of development that insiders themselves have agreed to in principle but are not yet ready to live by.

Democracy and development both depend upon citizens taking responsibility for power and recognizing complicity in the unavoidable violence that accompanies the creation and exercise of this power. This is why development as democratic political education requires that citizens learn how to make informed choices about their shared responsibility for and complicity in this web of power and violence. For example, development as democratic political education requires that farmers in the U.S. learn how to make informed decisions about import quotas and crop subsidies. They should know how these forms of power affect the choices that others have to develop freely and the violence that may result from these policies.

This picture of democracy and development as a network of power and violence has implications for how we draw the boundaries around responsibility and we assess the importance of complicity. The three key terms here are causes, conditions, and intentions. Let’s take the side of the farmer from the rich country first.

Is the sugar beet or cotton farmer in the United States who benefits from import quotas or crop subsidies really responsible for the effects these policies may have on the farmers in poorer countries who cannot compete with farmers in the richer country? Is it right to say that farmers who benefit from quotas and subsidies are complicit in the hardships that farmers in poorer countries must endure because of these policies? Isn’t there a difference between being responsible for a state of affairs because you intentionally caused it and only being a small part of a number of background conditions
that made it possible in some general sense? Farmers in rich countries do not want to make the lives of farmers (and consumers) in poor countries harder, but if they are to preserve their own way of life, then they need import quotas and crop subsidies to survive. Furthermore, they are no more complicit in the worsening conditions of the farmer in the poor country than they are responsible for them. They haven’t intentionally caused the harm by writing the rules of the global marketplace anymore than they have acted as an accomplice in this drama. They don’t pull the trigger and they don’t drive the getaway car.

This argument depends first upon a very fragile assumption that one can neutrally distinguish between important causes and mere background conditions. What makes certain antecedent events important causes? It cannot be something as simple as proximity in time or space. That could easily mean very trivial things could count as important causes. The difference really depends on what we have an interest in, that is, what we want to use the causal relationship to do. “The cause of an event in nature,” R.G. Collingwood has argued, “is the handle, so to speak, by which we can manipulate it.” Those things we wish to grab onto to use in a certain way become causes, and those things that are there but we have no interest in them as handles to achieve some end are relegated to the lesser status of background conditions. But, if our interests change and we need to reach deeper into the background to turn something else, then its causal connections to the sought-after end become more important.

The other feature of causation that seems to play an important part in the argument offered by the farmer from the rich country has to do with intention. But, it is not clear why the intention of the individual farmer should be decisive. Just because a farmer in a rich country is not aware of the ramifications that crop subsidies and import quotas have on farmers in poor countries could not possibly mean that these policies and their supporters are not responsible for untoward effects on farmers in some poor countries. We hold one another responsible for negligent, even criminally negligent actions, precisely because we believe that ignorance is no excuse. Sometimes, in fact, we believe that any reasonable person ought to have known, and this makes the failure to meet one’s responsibility even more serious.

These two objections – one from causation and the other from intention – do not mean that farmers from rich countries are solely responsible for the effects of subsidies and quotas on farmers and consumers in poor countries. They do not mean that all quotas and subsidies for all farmers, big and small, are wrong. What they indicate is the need for further democratic inquiry into who benefits and who suffers from these programs, what the alternatives might be, and how important are the interests served by the alternatives. Only with these questions in mind can development as a process of democratic political education, not just a process of agricultural production, proceed with the informed participation of those who are affected by it. Development as democratic political education understood in this way is about shared responsibility for a process of democratic political education, not about non-negotiable rights to competing ways of life or basic needs.
Development as Democratic Political Education: History and Art

How can democratic citizens in rich and poor countries learn what their social responsibilities are if they cannot rely on a theory of human rights and basic needs and their own intuitions about intentionality and causation? Here again I want to rely on Collingwood. The pragmatic conception of causation that he advocates is located within a more complex theory of history and historical understanding that is relevant to this practical question.

The challenge is first to understand more clearly how the prioritizing of causes and antecedent conditions are affected by practical interests. This is an historical problem, not a problem in bio-mechanics. How have interests shaped our understandings of causes and background conditions? How far into the background can a causal connection reach and how diffuse are its tendrils? To determine where the line between causation and background conditions has been drawn, we have to think about human interests historically. Collingwood’s account of history and historical understanding gives us one way of doing this. He helps us see how patterns of complicity, collaboration, and responsibility in power and for violence have evolved over time in response to competing human interests. In short, to understand the construction of power and the impact of violence, we must understand the problems that people took a strong interest in at the time and to which these constructs were a solution.

Collingwood’s famous example of the Roman wall illustrates this.18 To understand why the wall was built where it was and in the way it was, one must understand exactly what problems this kind of structure of power was designed to solve. Walls are archetypical forms of power. They divide communities for the sake of security and profit. They recall past collective tragedies and provide opportunities for renewal and recommitment. They can be backdrops for new conflicts, mere moveable props. They can advertise the future and hasten its coming. How we read a wall – whether it is a war memorial, a holy place, or a reservoir dam – will depend upon its history, and its history will depend upon the interests we have in parsing the past into a particular array of causes and background conditions.

Collingwood argues that there are better and worse ways of unearthing the past of these structures of power. The better ways are those that involve our re-enacting the dramas surrounding the construction and use of these structures of power. What did those who designed, built, and used the wall have in mind? We will only know if we can somehow re-enact these activities. This is not a matter of going through the motions that they went through. It is a matter of thinking things through as they did. It is a matter of remembering in a particular way.

To think at all about that past activity of thought, I must revive it in my own mind, for the act of thinking can be studied only as an act. But what is so revived is not a mere echo of the old activity, another of the same kind; it is the same activity taken up again and re-enacted, perhaps in order that, doing it over again under my own critical inspection, I may detect in it false steps of which critics
have accused me. In thus re-thinking my past thought I am not merely remembering it. I am constructing the history of a certain phase of my life: and the difference between memory and history is that whereas in memory the past is a mere spectacle, in history it is re-enacted in present thought.19

Whether we are rethinking our own thoughts (What could I have been thinking when I built that?) or struggling to re-think the thoughts of others who have designed, built, and used new structures of power, our re-thinking must be critical. We cannot be taken in by the spectacle but must find some way of maintaining a critical distance on past choices and actions without losing sight of the reasons that animated them.

This is not easy. There are numerous pitfalls. We do not want to reduce past actions to the thoughts and reasons that guided them. We do not want to fool ourselves into thinking that through an act of imagination we can think the way others once thought about a world we have never experienced. Collingwood does not address these problems facing historical understanding because at a certain point his theory of historical understanding verges on being a theory in which the history of our thinking overshadows other historical experiences.20 To identify our responsibilities for power and violence over time, we need a less abstract and more embodied account of critical re-enactment. That is to say, we need a way of re-enacting a fuller range of experiences than just the experience of thinking as if it could be abstracted from other dimensions of human experience.

John Dewey’s account of experience fleshes out Collingwood’s theory of historical re-enactment in a way that avoids the latter’s shortcomings and creates some critical pressure on the subject of historical understanding. Responsibility – whether it takes the form of causally grounded guilt or more tenuously connected complicity – is not something you can pin down simply by re-thinking the thoughts that preceded the culpable acts in question. There also must be a way of grounding this process of re-thinking in an actual re-enactment of the experiences of those caught up in this web of power and violence. “An ounce of experience is better than a ton of theory simply because it is only in experience that any theory has vital and verifiable significance.”21 Theories without experience, Dewey continued, become mere “catchwords” that actually “render thinking, or genuine theorizing, unnecessary and impossible.”

Here we run into just the opposite danger that Collingwood’s theory encounters. How much experience do you need (a ton? a half-ton?), and how is it to be incorporated into theory so that it does not become a string of “catchwords?” How does one verify theory through experience except through the use of yet another verification (meta-) theory? For Dewey the answer to skeptical questions like these could only be found in a closer examination of a particular kind of experience, aesthetic experience, because these experiences combined what Dewey called “doing” and undergoing.” In Art as Experience Dewey emphasized the important way in which aesthetic experience forms a bounded whole as the artist moves back and forth between doing and undergoing.
The doing may be energetic, and the undergoing may be acute and intense. But unless they are related to each other to form a whole in perception, the thing done is not fully esthetic. The making for example may be a display of technical virtuosity, and the undergoing a gush of sentiment or a reverie. If the artist does not perfect a new vision in his process of doing, he acts mechanically and repeats some old model fixed like a blue print in his mind.22

According to Dewey, this conception of aesthetic experience in which the doing and undergoing alternate within a single vision is not unrelated to other forms of experience. Aesthetic experience is “the clarified and intensified development of traits that belong to every normally complete experience.”

What constitutes a “complete” experience? Dewey suggests that it is one that is neither overly receptive nor overly energetic, and therefore one that permits both the doer and those who see or hear the experience from the outside the time to reflect back upon its genesis and its possible consequences to give it unity.

Overly receptive experiences are like daydreams that allow more and more to rush in, but no effort is made to cultivate any of the moments so that they can be used as the basis for action. On the other hand, overly energetic experiences are like frantic searches; the experiences are so “dispersed and miscellaneous as hardly to deserve the name.” In contrast to both, a complete experience is one in which the rhythms of doing and undergoing are not allowed to overwhelm each other. “What is done and what is undergone are thus reciprocally and cumulatively and continuously instrumental to each other.”23

Experiences on which citizens might reflect for the purpose of democratic political education ought to have this kind of completeness. It is by moving back and forth between “doing” (exercising their creative powers) and undergoing” (reflecting on the violence that accompanies the exercise of power) that citizens develop some critical purchase on their responsibility for, complicity in, and collaboration in the constitution of power and violence. Staying too long in one place obscures the dialectic of power and violence. It is this process of development as democratic political education that discloses the complex shared responsibilities that citizens have for the power they have generated and the violence that comes in its wake.

Return to the Grand Marché

To conclude, how should we answer the questions about individual and shared social responsibility that were posed for Jim in our opening example? Does the simile democracy as democratic political education help us move beyond Sen’s perspective of the situated consequentialist?

Jim clearly had several individual responsibilities that he failed to meet. He should have planned the trip to the grand marché more carefully and prepared
the students for young men like Moussa and Fakara. If he was going to hire the two men, he certainly should have negotiated more carefully.

His social responsibilities are more complex. From the perspective of a situated consequentialist, one might argue, he had a responsibility to consider the value of the high-priced tour for his students and its value for the two guides. Given their relative positions, was he responsible for paying $350 for a walking tour of the grand marché? Or, was the responsible thing to do to confront the guides and demonstrate to them and the students that regardless of who is involved, everyone has a right to be treated fairly? One might argue that despite the sour taste left in the mouths of Jim and his students if they paid the full price, the net gain for the students was still very high and the net gain for the guides probably was higher than what they would have received otherwise. Looking at the rights, duties, and overall wellbeing of all the parties “simultaneously”, on balance the responsible thing to do would have been to pay the $350. Even without a meal at the end, the enlightening visit to the grand marché and the valuable lesson learned from the transaction (always negotiate the price in advance), outweighed the bad feelings of being taken advantage of.

How might the alternative simile “development as democratic political education” change the way we see social responsibilities in this case?

First, even though Jim is the instructor in charge, there seems to be some degree of shared responsibility for this excursion that went bad. In their eagerness to shop the students may have unwittingly made it more difficult for Jim to negotiate a price in advance.

Second, Jim had a responsibility to situate the grand marché in a more revealing historical context. The grand marché, no less than the overcrowded streets he and his students traveled on their way there, has a history. Who buys and sells in these stalls? How much does it cost to rent them? Where does the merchandise come from? Where do the proceeds from sales go?

Third, Jim has a responsibility to help his students see the grand marché from more than the perspective of the eager shopper. For example, who are the ‘guides’ like Moussa and Fakara? How did they end up in this situation? A situated consequentialist has a responsibility not just to see consider the rights, duties, and wellbeing of all the parties concerned from his or her own situated perspective. It makes an important difference when one moves back and forth between perspectives. This is how the dynamic between power and violence comes into focus. For example, the violence that Jim and his students felt threatened by is very different from the violence that Moussa and Fakara experience everyday as they look for customers in the grand marché. Similarly, the power that Jim and his students have to withdraw cash from the ATM and purchase goods cheaply is not the same as the power that Moussa and Fakara have by virtue of their knowledge of the unmarked alleyways and streets. The powers
that Jim and his students have are closely connected to the violence that Moussa and Fakara experience. Conversely, the power that Moussa and Fakara have, when used strategically, threatens Jim and his students with a different form of violence.

Development as democratic political education will not eradicate these conflicts and differences. But it can make them more visible, and it can focus attention on their sources. Complicity may seem too strong a word for the shared social responsibilities that Jim, his students, and his guides have for this particular situation. Only, I would argue, if we think of it in a narrow legalistic way. As a reminder of our collaboration in the generation of structures of power, whether they are large dams or sprawling markets, complicity’s hard edge is all too appropriate. The grand marché is a source of livelihood for many at the same time as it is a site of violence for others. It takes more than just buyers and sellers to produce this situation.


5 Sen, Development as Freedom, p.293.


7 Sen, Development as Freedom, p.297.


14 Sen, Development as Freedom, p.283.


19 Collingwood, An Autobiography

20 Gadamer, Truth and Method

21 John Dewey, Democracy and Education,

22 John Dewey, Art as Experience,

23 Dewey, Art as Experience