

[No, Britain isn't a developing country](#) [1]

Written by [Sam Bowman](#) [2] | Tuesday 10 December 2013

Britain is a developing country, [says Aditya Chakraborty](#) [3]. He bases this largely on the fact that it is below some poor countries on a number of international rankings. (Never has an article owed so much to Wikipedia's [?List of countries by](#) [4]? pages.) Some of the rankings seem obscure: is Barbados's superior [?ground transport?](#) system worth caring about? Does Mali beating the UK in terms of business investment tell us anything? Others rely on the reader not knowing much about the country Britain does worse than: the UK may have a worse road network than Chile, but Chile's Public-Private Partnership roads have made it [a regional leader in infrastructure](#) [5].

One thing that Chakraborty is particularly concerned about is graphene, a super-strong substance first isolated in 2004 and pioneered by scientists at the University of Manchester. What worries Chakraborty is that South Korean firms are bringing graphene to market much more quickly than British firms. This, he says, is emblematic of [?a familiar pattern of generating innovations for the rest of the world to capitalise on?](#).

I guess that's supposed to be a bad thing, but it doesn't sound like it to me. It's good when inventions spread beyond their birthplace: to use Matt Ridley's metaphor, the ideas [?have sex?](#) and mutate more quickly. Overall, the world [? and Britain, if for some reason that's all you care about ?](#) has done well from Tim Berners-Lee's world wide web being capitalised on by non-Britons in Silicon Valley. Germans are better off that Japanese firms make cars as well as Volkswagen, and Finns are better off that Californians tried to make mobile phones better too.

Chakraborty might object that he doesn't mind South Koreans doing well with graphene, he just wishes Britons were too. But why graphene in particular? Chakraborty's counterpart in Seoul could write an identical piece worrying about South Korea's relative weakness in finance, tourism, the cultural arts, or telecommunications. When firms in different countries specialise in different areas it is pointless to look at any single product or sector to judge which country is healthy.

There's not much point in comparing the growth of rich and poor countries [? poor countries are playing ?catch up?](#) and can grow quickly by applying innovations already developed elsewhere. But if Britons should be worried about something, it's the UK's centralised public sector, which, lacking the profit motive as a crucible for new ideas, is less innovative than international equivalents. For instance, the British health system essentially free rides on innovations in America.

Chakraborty asks [?How can any nation that came up with the BBC and the NHS be considered in the same breath as India or China??](#). Good question.

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