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Late Victorian Holocausts

Book Review

Alex Trotter

2004, Spring/Summer

a review of

Late Victorian Holocausts: El Niño Famines and the Making of the Third World by Mike Davis (Verso, New York, 2001) 464 pp., \$27.00 hardcover/\$20.00 paper.

In the last quarter of the nineteenth century a series of devastating droughts and famines occurred in the monsoon tropics and northern China. The extreme climatic conditions that brought about these famines were associated with weather patterns known as El Niño/Southern Oscillation (ENSO). The worst of these events happened in India, China, and Brazil. The loss of life was staggering, between 30 million and 60 million victims of starvation and epidemics in three separate but related global famines in 1877-1878, 1888-1891, and 1896-1902. Not since the Black Death of 500 years earlier had there been a disaster of such magnitude. The mortality rates in some countries were as great as if a nuclear holocaust had occurred. In telling the story of these forgotten disasters, Mike Davis shows that it wasn't bad weather alone that killed so many people, and details how the relationship between global climate changes associated with El Niño and imperialist policies pursued

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by European capitalist regimes resulted in a dramatic division of humanity into have and have-not regions of the world.

Davis, who calls himself a "Marxist-Environmentalist," sets out in this work to analyze the convergence of failed economic and political systems with "ecological poverty," defined as the loss or depletion of the natural resource base of traditional agriculture. In precolonial times, the peasants in India and China had been protected from famine-associated subsistence crises by a kind of bureaucratic or despotic welfare system practiced by the Mogul and Qing states, which maintained irrigation systems and stockpiled and distributed food in times of hardship caused by natural disasters. As the traditional social and economic systems were undermined by the global laissez-faire economy centered in London, the peasants were left in the lurch when epochal drought conditions and crop failures struck, and they perished in the millions. The British authorities were extremely parsimonious in their aid, which came with absurd conditions when it came at all.

In 120 years of British rule, there were four times as many famines as there had been in the previous millennium. The Radical journalist William Digby, describing the 1876 Madras famine, said, "When the part played by the British Empire in the 19th century is regarded by the historian 50 years hence, the unnecessary deaths of millions of Indians would be its principal and most notorious monument." But who remembers it now? Lords Lytton, Elgin II, and Curzon, the British viceroys of India during this period, presided over an empire of suffering. Starving Indians begged the police to arrest them, because at least in jail they would have something to eat. Stockpiles of food existed, as did transportation networks to deliver it, but people could not afford to buy it. In an echo of the Irish famine, grain was exported from India to Britain while people starved. British relief measures required applicants to travel to dormitory camps and perform hard labor to "earn" their rations. Desperation even led some people to cannibalism. Lytton, whom Davis calls "India's Nero," lavished money on

the millions of victims of British and other Western great-power imperialism in the course of all the late (and early) Victorian holocausts. Davis has set out to redress this lacuna by writing a "Black Book" of Western capitalism, and he does a good job of it. He does actually discuss the Chinese famine of 1958-1961 under Communist rule, which according to him also had an El Niño origin exacerbated by political determinants.

Davis unfortunately defers to Indian nationalist and Chinese Communist interpretations at several points. He refers to the Chinese Revolution as the "Liberation" and praises the PRC regime, even under Mao, for its "impressive commitments to food security and disaster mitigation." Here Davis's leftism shows; he's too deferential to a regime well known for its authoritarianism and brutality, even if he does criticize its "absence of socialist democracy." The indispensability of the bureaucracy is taken for granted, but it is not understood for what it really is—the expression of a state-capitalist French Revolution of the East.

Imperialism is not the only enemy we face, any more than fascism is. These evils won't disappear except through the overcoming of the totality of modern civilization of which they form particularly gangrenous aspects. If the modern Leviathan remains imperialist, it's no longer Victoria's or the Kaiser's imperialism as critiqued by Lenin and Luxemburg. Similarly, if it continues to generate strains of fascism, they no longer sport brown shirts and swastikas. Anti-imperialism, like anti-fascism, as a one-dimensional crusade only gets trapped in a feedback loop that reinforces the whole system: Lord Lytton's Raj or the Khmer Rouge—pick your poison. Overdevelopment of the West is as much a problem as underdevelopment of the rest. Davis presents a powerful historical analysis and indictment of the imperialist crimes that built the wealth and the poverty of the modern world, but his uncritical employment of the concept of "third world" helps to give bureaucratic national liberationism a new lease on its sorry career.

Queen Victoria's investiture as Empress of India and on military skirmishes with the Russians on the Afghan frontier in preference to relief efforts for the famine victims.

In China there was drought followed by floods of the Yellow River during a time when the country was being overrun by foreign armies, Christian proselytizers, and cheap goods imported from British India that wrecked local handicrafts. The weakened Qing dynasty could no longer effectively fulfill its "mandate of heaven" to control the floods through hydraulic engineering and provide food relief. As in India, millions fell and horrors abounded: living skeletons fought over the flesh of their dead neighbors, children were sold for food, and sick or dying people were often attacked and devoured by wild animals. Disease epidemics finished off those weakened by starvation.

In the Sertão region in the north of Brazil, Britain had no direct political or military control, but the power of London banks still called the shots. The Conservative sugar planter-aristocracy of Brazil, where slavery was abolished only in 1888, followed the reactionary Roman Catholic church hierarchy, while the Liberal bourgeoisie was deeply influenced by British utilitarianism and social Darwinism. The Brazilian elites followed the British example from India of giving relief to afflicted peasants only in exchange for labor. When starving sertanejos made an exodus out of drought-stricken areas, looting on the way, they were forcibly deported into the Amazonian interior. Racism also played a role in public policy; the elites concentrated on developing the southern part of Brazil and encouraging immigration from European countries into that region while neglecting the north, where most of the population was black.

Imperialists took advantage of the weakened condition of stricken countries to aggrandize their conquests and spheres of influence against impoverished people who proved no match for Maxim guns. Famine and drought proved a great help in the carve-up of Africa by European powers, and also became the allies

of the U.S. military against Filipino rebels, of the Japanese in Korea, and of the French in New Caledonia, whose brutal pacification was witnessed by the exiled Commune Louise Michel.

The economic mechanisms of the New Imperialism included the Gold Standard, initiated by Britain and joined by most industrialized countries after 1871. The colonial and semicolonial countries still based their currencies on silver, so when demonetized silver flooded the world market, the currencies of India and China were seriously depreciated, adding to the distress of these countries. The native industries of India were beaten into submission by outrageously one-way tariffs that guaranteed the ascendancy of British manufactures. Domination of one country aided the domination of the other: the drug pushers of the East India Company forcibly introduced opium from India into China to create a demand that would yield lucrative taxes on its export, then used the proceeds to finance military campaigns on the Indian subcontinent. Forces from the Indian army organized and officered by the British were then sent on campaigns to participate in the wars waged to subjugate other countries, including China, Sudan, Egypt, and Afghanistan.

Starving peasants were not simply victims, but rose up in revolt in numerous countries. These revolts were often led by charismatic religious figures and took on a millenarian aspect. In the turmoil that came on the heels of the Opium Wars, China experienced the greatest number of such popular revolts, including the Taiping, Nian, and Muslim rebellions. The Taiping was the most significant, turning into a massive civil war that left additional millions dead. The Boxer uprising at the end of the nineteenth century targeted foreigners such as Christian missionaries. The Qing dynasty was saved at this time only by military intervention by the Great Powers. In the Sudan the British were challenged by the followers of the Mahdist jihad. And in Brazil's Nordeste the impoverished sertanejos gathered around a popular priest and built a "new Jerusalem" in a remote part of the countryside called Canudos, which initially

vention of a more "advanced" foreign power. Eventually, through exposure to the Russian populist movement, he abandoned this notion and decided there was a possibility to avoid the necessity of a capitalist stage of development; the peasant-artisan community could move directly from being the foundation of Oriental despotism to being the foundation of a communist society-with the important condition that it could only succeed with support from the insurgent working classes in the Western countries.

It's possible, of course, that Marx was wrong about this too. One of the main questions in history is what accounted for the rise of the West. One explanation points to favorable geographic and climatic conditions (see, for example, Jared Diamond's *Guns, Germs and Steel*). There were other civilizations of the Old World including China, India, and the Islamic realm that had some proto-capitalist features (e.g., extensive trading networks by land and sea). Given the anomalous example of Japan's swift accession to capitalist modernity following the Meiji Restoration, it is perhaps not impossible that a true capitalism could have developed somewhere in Asia before it did in Europe; in that case it would still have expanded globally through imperialism, only it would be an Indian or Chinese-centered rather than a European-centered empire. Today capital has no more need for revolutions; the cycle of revolutions is finished, and, as Camatte says, there is a convergence of capitalism and the Asiatic form. All candidates are now Manchurian. Instead of Oriental despotism, however, it is the despotism of capital.

Davis acknowledges that the term "third world" is of Cold War vintage. Its use therefore inevitably summons a range of themes associated with the Cold War that Davis doesn't often spell out explicitly, although these themes lurk in the background. For example, because of the emphasis given them by the Cold War, the multimillion-mortality famines in Soviet Ukraine under Stalin and in China during Mao's "Great Leap Forward" are relatively well known by many people in the West who know nothing at all about

Even if this could be universally done it would be utterly unsustainable environmentally.

Davis points out how the industrial supremacy of Europe was accomplished in part through the deindustrialization of Asia and tribute extracted from colonies (and before that through the African slave trade and New World plantations). The paradigmatic case was that of India, which had early manufactures such as textiles that rivaled those of England at the outset of the Industrial Revolution. British economic weapons such as tariffs then destroyed the competition and placed India in a dependent position. Part of the apology for the British Raj was that it was bringing modern medicine, a free press, and technology such as railroads and telegraphy to a land stagnating in Oriental despotism. This view was initially shared by Marx, who saw a progressive role for the British Empire in India and even looked forward to that country's complete Westernization. After the great mutiny of the sepoys in 1857, however, his views on India started to evolve in a direction more critical of imperialism. It became clearer that it was British despotism, built on top of native despotism and making use of it, that was holding India down in every way and causing much destruction but little regeneration.

Yet the idea of Oriental despotism, which Davis mentions in passing dismissively, and the "Asiatic mode of production" associated with it, might offer a better way of studying the problem of imperialism and "underdevelopment." The industries of Asian countries such as India had a handicraft basis and were rooted in the ancient village-community. But there was no capitalism (i.e., the reign of autonomous exchange value) in Asia per se and no city-state bourgeoisie arising out of a feudal society as had occurred in western Europe. Marx initially thought that the dissolution of the "patriarchal" rural village-community, which was the foundation of the despotic regime (Indian caste system, Chinese emperors, Russian tsars) by capitalism could not arise from within such a society and would have to be instigated from outside by the imperialist inter-

repulsed attacks of the Brazilian army, but eventually it was razed and its defenders slaughtered.

Historically, the forms of social inequality had tended to be more "vertical" than "horizontal": at the time of the French Revolution, the gap in material conditions of life among the different social classes within European societies was by far greater than the overall differences in wealth of European countries as compared with civilizations in other regions of the world. After 1850, however, there was a swift and dramatic decline in the fortunes of the non-Western world as power shifted decisively to western Europe and its settler offshoots. By the end of the nineteenth century, the "prisoners of starvation" referred to in the "Internationale" tended overwhelmingly to be the peasants in the colonial world who were being violently integrated into the new global economy.

Late Victorian Holocausts is in many ways impressive; Davis's work is about as good as leftist scholarship gets. Nevertheless there are bones to pick in it, having to do with its very leftism. My major problem is with this term "third world," a concept with a baleful pedigree, but Davis puts it even into the subtitle of his book, so apparently he feels that it has some useful validity. This term is pregnant with obfuscations, however, that serve Davis ill in using it. He seems vaguely aware of this, because even he places the term in quotation marks most of the time; he settles on it as a kind of shorthand to describe the inequality of wealth and incomes, or "development gap," among nations that were shaped most decisively in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. In this schema there is a "first world," or Western bloc, of developed capitalist states, initially consisting of western Europe, North America, and Japan, supplemented later by "Pacific Rim" outposts; a "second world" consisting of a partially industrialized bloc of Socialist states; and the rest of the world being "third," mired in barely decolonized and scarcely industrialized poverty, and whose loyalties are fought over by the first two. This term has been seen with much less frequency in the last decade or so, since the collapse of the Soviet Union. If there's

no longer a "second world," then this tripartite descriptive scheme naturally falls apart.

The history of the "third world" concept warrants a closer look. As a specific term it was invented in 1952 by a French sociologist named Alfred Sauvy, by analogy with the third estate (i.e., the commoners in France in the French Revolutionary period and before), and this term, *tiers monde*, had become common in the French media by the late 1950s. The areas of the world described by this term were generally meant to include most of Asia, Africa, Oceania, and Latin America, containing in the aggregate more than 70 percent of the world's population and, following decolonization, a quantitative preponderance at the United Nations. The real emergence of third worldism as an ideology, or constellation of ideologies, took place at the Bandung Conference held in Indonesia in 1955, animated principally by China and India and seeking to unify all the "developing" nations of the world who declared themselves to be nonaligned in the "superpower" confrontation of the Cold War. This neutralism turned out to be a chimera, however, as the "non-aligned" nations could not avoid being drawn into the orbit of one power bloc or the other.

Before Bandung, the third world as an ideological prototype can be traced to National Bolshevism and Strasserite fascism in Germany (i.e., the anti-imperialist "proletarian nation" thesis) as well as the 1920 Baku "Peoples of the East" congress convened by the Bolsheviks in Soviet Azerbaijan with delegates from nations oppressed under the tsarist empire, which proposed that the colonized nations everywhere should follow the Bolshevik example. After the colonial empires became unhinged by World War II, this is what many countries did, although the model they followed was a further degeneration even from Bolshevism. As the Third International decomposed, through Stalinism and into Stalino-nationalism, the People's Republic of China under Mao became the father-image of revolution in the poorest countries. Third worldism came into full flower through the dissolution of the

monolithic facade of Marxism-Leninism upon China's break with a Soviet Union that no longer had any use for Stalin. A few years after that, Cuba appeared to provide another alternative model. In India, where the first nationalist groups in the nineteenth century had looked to the Irish Home Rule movement as their example, the Soviet-style development model was fused with parliamentary democracy inherited from the British.

Third worldism generated numerous rival variants of national socialism (in the generic sense of that term), the basic common element being the worship of economic development, most often administered by a police state, as the cure for everything. Hypothetical unity among the tiers monde nations was belied by the war fought by India and China along their Himalayan border in 1962. Identity politics pivoting around race, religion, and nationalism can be said to have had its origins at Bandung, with the various pan-ethnic movements, such as pan-Arabism and pan-Africanism, that it embraced.

China's abandonment of Maoism and the collapse of the Soviet bloc threw the ideology of third worldism into deep crisis as its link with Marxism withered, but it hasn't disappeared; the World Social Forum of today calls for a vague "Asia-Africa solidarity" and invokes the principles enunciated at the original Bandung conference. An alternate term often encountered is the "Global South," which has been in use since the 1970s and is a favorite of U.N. bureaucrats. In the world of academe its complement is "postcolonial identity" studies.

Those who view the predicament of the poor countries as a development gap tend to be committed to an idea of progress that implicitly sees the entire world eventually industrializing up to "first world" or "G-7" levels. Russia got shoehorned into the exclusive club of wealthiest and most politically powerful countries to make it a G-8, and it's conceivable that within a few years China will make it a G-9. The Situationists, in their critique of Marxist third worldism, described this as "catching up to capitalist reification."