



Late Victorian Holocausts: El Niño Famines and the Making of the Third World

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Examining a series of El Niño-induced droughts and the famines that they spawned around the globe in the last third of the 19th century, Mike Davis discloses the intimate, baleful relationship between imperial arrogance and natural incident that combined to produce some of the worst tragedies in human history.

Late Victorian Holocausts focuses on three zones of drought and subsequent famine: India, Northern China; and Northeastern Brazil. All were affected by the same global climatic factors that caused massive crop failures, and all experienced brutal famines that decimated local populations. But the effects of drought were magnified in each case because of singularly destructive policies promulgated by different ruling elites.

Davis argues that the seeds of underdevelopment in what later became known as the Third World were sown in this era of High Imperialism, as the price for capitalist modernization was paid in the currency of millions of peasants' lives.

Late Victorian Holocausts: El Niño Famines and the Making of the Third World Details

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From Reader Review Late Victorian Holocausts: El Niño Famines and the Making of the Third World for online ebook

Jacob Russell says

Here is the historical background of the "global economy" and the distribution of wealth and power. A snapshot of who is going to suffer as global warming and rising seas bring us ever greater not-so-natural disasters. A book I wish I could persuade everyone to read.

Lara Messersmith-Glavin says

In a stellar (and readable) example of interdisciplinary historical research, Davis lays bare the skeleton underlying many of the popular conceptions regarding the nature of the "Third World" and its economies. Drawing from sources as diverse as scientific accounts of El Niño and La Niña cycles at the turn of the last century, missionary writings, accountancy notes, travelers' journals, newspaper clippings, and other exhaustive primary and secondary works, Davis describes how the British empire, along with other colonial forces, took advantage of periods of what would have been survivable drought in India, China, Ethiopia, Sudan, and Brazil, and used the circumstances of need to crush the local structures of governance and food-sharing networks and create a horror show of poverty, disease, and the starvation deaths of millions upon millions of people, while simultaneously setting the stage for a further century of economic privation and authoritarian control.

Cheryl Klein says

Davis is a classic muckraker who does an admirable job of combining social and ecological history while debunking many Western myths about how poor countries got so poor.

He's also an academic who includes more obtuse shout-outs to other historians and economists than I care to read. I have to admit that I skipped 13 pages of the middle section on El Niño patterns and at times wished I was reading a New Yorker-article version of this book. Still, Late Victorian Holocausts is a great counterpoint to pretty much everything you thought you knew about world history.

sologdin says

Though I agree with other reviewers that Davis is at his best when discussing India, the sections on Brazil, China, and numerous other places (to which he pays insufficient attention, truly) are generally informative. Perhaps it's fair to say that he establishes his argument on the basis of the British genocides in India, and then produces schematic outlines of varying depths for the imperial genocides in China, Brazil, Egypt, the Sudan, Ethiopia, the Philippines, and so on. That slight flaw noted, this text has very high quality--fine documentation and a well reasoned, committed perspective. Overall, this text is probably the first step in rationally countering the trash that is *The Black Book of Communism*--call this chapter one of *The Black Book of Capitalism* (perhaps Blum's *Killing Hope* can be chapter 2--and, yes, there is in fact a *Black

Book of Capitalism* in German, which is actually about capitalism; I am unaware of any translation yet to English--no surprise there!)

Some reviewers have pooh-poohed the text on the basis that it sets up typical marxist hierarchies of villainy in its attempt to define famines as political events. This complaint is of course a straw man: though proper marxists will point out that there is a politics to everything--including the weather--it is unlikely that marxism traditionally attempts to blame someone for everything.

Some have also carped against the text for suggesting simply that some deadly virus of capitalism infected China, resulting in the famines there. In fact, Davis' reading of the Manchu Qing dynasty and its policies is much more nuanced than that, and considers a host of issues--including ENSO, the Taiping and other rebellions, surely the Opium Wars, the catastrophic shift of the Yellow River in 1855, and numerous others--including indigenous Chinese corruption, and, yes, some of the more familiar brutalities of the capitalist system.

Critics tend likewise to have a dismissive attitude toward Davis' thesis regarding the integration of India, China, and Brazil into the world capitalist system--not a useful intellectual response to a serious historical debate. I for one would appreciate an actual refutation, by means of proofs that the genocides indeed were not caused, exacerbated, or otherwise enabled by British capitalism & imperialism. Instead, for the moment, all the rightwing offers is "two cheers for colonialism," like a pack of dirtbag fascists.

Critics have otherwise attempted to critique Davis on the basis of a perceived turn in his analysis of the big 20th century famines, under Stalin and Mao, which are said to be unrelated to ENSO, both in fact and in Davis. Such statements are fairly dishonest and perplexing. Davis does in fact make a case for such developments continuing into the 20th century--and he does in fact furthermore consider, briefly albeit, both the Ukrainian and Chinese famines mentioned above. Though his treatment overall of Russia is one of the most schematic in the text, he does note that the Volga basin seems to feature a correlation of ENSO to drought/famine, and moreover records the 1930 El Nino as correlated to the 1931 drought crisis (269). This undoubtedly does not explain the fullness of the Ukrainian famine, but it certainly will contribute to an explanation that otherwise focuses on Stalinist criminality and commie bungling. The same goes for the Maoist case, where Davis correlates the famines associated with the Great Leap Forward very specifically to ENSO, an argument certainly to be ignored by unreconstructed Cold Warriors and crypto-mccarthyites (248-251).

One of the most assinine criticism of the text from the rightwing regards Davis' thesis that the maoist famine was attributable to the inability of the countryside to communicate effectively with the bureaucracy, the purported lack of socialist democracy, which is summarily dismissed as a fantasy. It is incredibly obtusely dishonest to make this kind of criticism. Davis does attempt to explain the Chinese famine as a result of a complex of factors, including human decisions, meteorology, and the weight of the aggregate of history (the suggestion that Chiang, a victorious Japanese invasion, or an outright US occupation of China would've performed better is quite simply laughable, given the circumstances).

Also, critics respond to Davis by heaping adoration on Robert Conquest and western Cold War Sovietologists; these folks would have us believe that, say, Stalin killed 50 million people in the USSR, but still managed to defeat the Nazis, losing 20 million more in the process--such claims make little sense--indeed, the only people who accept Conquest's exaggerations are pathological anti-communists who don't need any evidence at all for anything.

The anti-communist will further criticize Davis by suggesting that the lack of "socialist democracy" in China

is axiomatic, sniping that socialist democracy has never existed. This more or less vapid point is both puerile and a red herring, evading Davis' thesis--which was that the lack of two way communication between Beijing and the Chinese peasant allowed for the true extent of the famine to remain relatively unknown to the state planners. (The rightwing response is of course that the maoists wanted the peasants to die off--which is about as plausible as Bush wanting to blow up Manhattan--but, what the hell, they're evil commies!)

It is likewise disingenuous, as any attempts to pair a socialist economy with a political democracy have been destroyed by the Western powers--consider the destruction of Allende's regime in Chile (1973), to take the most famous example, the sabotage of the Vietnamese general elections in 1955, the low intensity warfare carried out against any number of regimes in Latin America or Africa (Nicaragua? Angola?), resulting in their degeneration and destruction, and the crushing of dozens of movements that struggled against autocratic capitalist regimes all over the world (El Salvador? South Africa? Philippines? Indonesia? everywhere in the Middle East?)--all crimes committed by the US precisely to destroy any potential "socialist democracy" from coming into existence and thereby providing a model of development that counters western militarism and economic hegemony, i.e., the friendly fascism of the US and its allies.

Very highly recommended. Would be perfect if the rigor of the Indian sections were carried through to the rest (including the 20th century items aforesaid).

Javier says

One of the most depressing books I've ever read--highly recommended.

Sara says

Empire laid bare

[Through my ratings, reviews and edits I'm providing intellectual property and labor to Amazon.com Inc., listed on Nasdaq, which fully owns Goodreads.com and in 2013 posted revenues for \$74 billion and \$274 million profits. Intellectual property and labor require compensation. Amazon.com Inc. is also requested to provide assurance that its employees and contractors' work conditions meet the highest health and safety standards at all the company's sites].

Mike Davis attacks the reader with a firestorm of brutal epiphanies, and even if you're not so smart, or have a degree in economics, you get to grasp the idea. But after discharging his bombs, as in an air strike, the Red Baron veers off, leaving you on the ground, lost amidst smoke and debris. There's no conclusion to the sequence of blows, no further readings, no wrapping up.

The book trains the reader in the unpleasant discipline of Empire Pattern Recognition (EPR), and implicitly, after 400 pages spent analysing the most extreme examples of nation states exploiting other nations and their peoples, the reader is expected to continue by themselves, moving from India, China, Egypt, Ethiopia, Brazil between the 1870s and 1900s, to any place in the present day. Do not think - not even for a second - that the holocausts are over. Millions died of hunger because of market ideology in bad faith under Queen Victoria, millions continue to die from market ideology in bad faith today.

What resistance is possible? The book's main lesson is that empire first and foremost reengineers societies to make them more vulnerable to volatility (of climate, purchasing power, health conditions). Any attempt at dismantling those institutions that for a given society represent solidarity, i.e. security of livelihood for all, has to be counteracted.

The perfect companion to Polanyi's *The Great Transformation: The Political and Economic Origins of Our Time*.

Jonfaith says

If the history of British rule in India were to be condensed into a single fact, it is this: there was no increase in India's per capita income from 1757 to 1947.

This is a harrowing tome, one dense with statistics and cutting with testimonial. The first section details the effects of drought and famine on India, China and Brazil in the late 19C. Their are accounts from notables of the time. The second section examines the science of El Nino. The final section surveys the global economies of the period, citing all the requisite authorities, the conclusion is despairing. Economic and technological advances clearly set the table for despair and calamity. Racism and corruption maximized the effect.

Jim Collins says

The author divides his book into three sections. The first section comes off as an overheated tabloid exposé a la "The Untold Story of El Nino's Global Impacts." That writing style backfires in the context of a scholarly monograph, which this book purports to be, because an expository essay's thesis is supposed to be developed by the evidence, not the temperature of the analysis. Scholarly research should be balanced, contemplative, and it should seek complexity. And while Dr. Davis tones down his hyperbole in the other two sections by discarding the eardrum-shattering verbiage of the earlier section and adopting a more discursive tone, his analysis is anything but balanced, contemplative, and complex. It's too bad because that mediocre analysis compromised his strong integration of some complex material and the development of a research purpose that was driven by an ingenious hypothesis. Yes, I know, the book won a lot of awards. I am not convinced. Sorry.

Andrew says

Previous Mike Davis books showed a brilliant polemical imagination, but this is a book that manages to combine that polemical fire with a rigorous academic discourse, reinforced with reams of quantitative, demographic, and meteorological data. Certainly, Davis presents a compelling argument for how colonialism and liberal capitalism starved certain regions in particular, stoked social unrest, exacerbated social disparities, and destroyed native techniques for dealing with climactic extremes. I would like if he had drawn out how his "late Victorian holocausts" continue to impact the third world, but it's a good starting point.

Maia says

explains how the Victorian Empire created the Third World, using mass starvation as a tool

Naeem says

Mind blowing.

For example: his use of the methods of science. Drought turns into famine under British rule; drought does not turn into famine during home rule in India and China. Question: why? Answer? well read it and find out.

For example: makes you wonder if the Nazis had anything on the Brits. Why then do I celebrate London?

For example: why didn't I know about the policy driven famines in India and China?

Yes of course, we have been fed lies; lie upon lie upon lie. But we have been fed systematically. There is balance in the world, is there not? While others are starved of food, and culture, and, dignity we are fed lies and lies and lies.

Kevin says

The Brilliant:

What Liberals don't tell you, i.e. History 101 of the modern world:

--Liberalism and Imperialism, 2 sides of the same coin... On one side, the winners bask in their spoils; on the other side, the losers wallow in desecration. This book is not meant to simply cross to the other side and pick through the bones; it is meant to rebuild historical context. Why? Liberal propaganda relies on illiteracy and mutilation of any remnants of history, where "Imperialism" is unnamed, ambiguous, and carefully reframed as free market competition, natural and even progressive. Heck, if we drop the politically-correct facade, the message is clear: the West was burdened by the enlightened task of bringing civilization to the backward, colored continents.

Next, Liberals proclaim: "Socialism is baaaad, because millions died in those countries, just compare it with Capitalist countries, end of story". We might as well proclaim the world to be flat, just open your eyes, end of story.

Left unsaid: if we are comparing countries, where is the starting point? It turns out the starting point for Socialist countries is 20th century revolutions, in countries used as mules to accumulate wealth for (guess who?) the "Capitalist" countries. What a coincidence! We can let Michael Parenti take it from here:
<https://youtu.be/O8k0yO-deoA?t=26>

Back to the book, some highlights:

--Non-capitalist civilizations of China and India were leaders in traded goods and were overtaken by violent

conquest (instead of free market competition). The book's last quarter maps out British imperialism, where British free trade policy eventually led to second-rate technology compared to American and German tariff-protected state-subsidized innovations. Thus, imperialism of India and China kept the British Empire going during the Late Victorian era and indirectly subsidized American/German industrialization.

--Tens of millions died of famines during the Late Victorian era (1876-1902). Are we to believe the ancient civilizations of China and India are destined for "overpopulation" and starvation? Davis details the political nature of mass famines. China and India had numerous adaptations (price control, grain surplus granaries/redistribution mechanisms, hydraulic infrastructure to handle floods/irrigation) but these all collapsed as British imperialism forced both countries to become cheap exporters for the British world market. **Mass famine resulted not from absolute food scarcity, but from high food prices of laissez-faire market, as State famine relief was demolished.** The dispossessed died next to railroads that shipped food away for export. Profit over people.

--Details of China and India's prior famine relief infrastructure were fascinating. While European peasants had no guarantee of subsistence as a human right during Europe's Liberal "Age of Reason", French Physiocrats marveled at China's mobilization for famine relief. Never believe "there is no alternative".

--"If the history of British rule in India were to be condensed into a single fact, it is this: there was no increase in India's per capita income from 1757 to 1947."

--Still have a gap for the famines of Mao/Stalin to be explored. After that, this ties in nicely with Vijay Prashad's *The Darker Nations: A People's History of the Third World* (20th century) and Christian Parenti's *Tropic of Chaos: Climate Change and the New Geography of Violence* (21st century)...

The Bad:

--We must commend such an ambitious endeavor. I do wonder about parts of the book's organization, i.e. whether a more consistent structure throughout the book would alleviate the bombardment of facts/dates/numbers.

--Much of the climatology details went over my head, but the bits I got were worth it.

Avery says

Required reading for anyone who wants to understand the changes in global capitalism in the late 19th century that led to the new imperialist era. Don't just read Lenin and Luxemburg, read this too. You'll want to take breaks though, it's a pretty brutal read.

Richard Reese says

In the years 1876-1879 and 1896-1902 between 12.2 and 29.3 million died of famine in India. In the years 1876-1879 and 1896-1900 between 19.5 and 30 million died of famine in China. In the same period, an estimated 2 million died in Brazil. Famine hit these three nations the hardest, but many other nations were also affected. In the US, churches organized to send relief to hungry farmers in the Dakotas and western Kansas.

Mike Davis wrote about these famines in his book *Late Victorian Holocausts*. The famines occurred in regions slammed by severe drought. The droughts have been linked to the El Niño Southern Oscillation (ENSO), a major factor in global weather patterns.

Droughts have been common throughout history, and agricultural societies have commonly prepared for them by creating emergency reserves of stored grain. Because of political shifts in many regions, these safety nets were in poor condition during the late Victorian droughts. In the wake of the Industrial Revolution came a new mode of economic thinking that frowned on setting aside significant wealth for insurance against disaster. It was more profitable to sell the grain today, pocket the cash, and worry about tomorrow's problems tomorrow. Peasants were expendable.

The Qing dynasty in China believed that subsistence was a human right, and it had relief management systems in place to reduce the toll of famines during drought years or floods. By the late Victorian era, conflicts with colonial powers had drained the wealth of the Qing government, so it was incapable of effectively responding to the catastrophic droughts.

Prior to the British colonization of India, the Moguls had a similar system for responding to famine. The British, on the other hand, were cruel masters (as they had been during the 1845 famine in Ireland). Food was widely available, but few could afford the inflated prices. While millions were starving, they exported Indian wheat. They outlawed donations of private relief. They forbid the Pariahs from foraging for forest foods, leading to 155,000 deaths. They created relief camps where the starving received inadequate rations, and 94 percent died. Very civilized chaps, eh?

The hungry hordes in Brazil were the victims of their own corrupt government, which had disposed of grain reserves. Brazil was not a colony of Britain, but English investors and creditors played a powerful role in the economy, turning Brazil into an “informal colony” that was kept permanently in debt.

Davis argued that the millions of deaths were largely a deliberate “holocaust” rather than a spell of bad luck, because political actions were a primary factor behind the high mortality rates. He also argued that this holocaust played a role in the creation of the Third World. In the eighteenth century, Europe did not have the highest standard of living. The biggest manufacturing districts were in India and China. Their workers ate better, had lower unemployment, and often earned more than workers in Europe. Literacy rates were higher, including women.

One of Davis's primary objectives was to spank capitalism, colonialism, and the hideous overseers of the British Empire. There has been lively discussion in the reader feedback at Amazon, and a number of critics have questioned the way in which Davis assigned blame for the massive famines. For me, the book had important messages: (1) Droughts happen. (2) Agricultural societies are highly vulnerable to droughts. (3) Famines commonly follow droughts. (4) Famines can be horrific.

When rains ended an Indian drought in 1878, the mosquito population exploded, and hundreds of thousands of malnourished survivors died of malaria. Meanwhile, locusts gobbled up the growing young plants. Hungry peasants murdered many creditors who threatened foreclosure. Then came gangs of armed tax collectors. Hungry wild animals became very aggressive, dragging away the weak, screaming. In the Madras Deccan, “the only well-fed part of the local population were the pariah dogs, ‘fat as sheep,’ that feasted on the bodies of dead children.”

In China, the flesh of the starved was sold at markets for four cents a pound. People sold their children to buy food. Husbands ate their wives. Parents ate their children. Children ate their parents. Thousands of thieves were executed. At refugee camps, many perished from disease. If too many refugees accumulated, they were simply massacred. In some regions, relief took more than a year to arrive.

Davis's vivid and extensive descriptions of famine times remind an increasingly obese society that we are

living in a temporary and abnormal bubble of cheap and abundant calories. Importantly, he puts a human face on the consequences of climate change, a subject usually presented in purely abstract form: parts per million, degrees Celsius, and colorful computer-generated charts, graphs, and maps.

Near the end of the book, Davis gives us a big, fat, juicy discussion on the history of agriculture and ecological catastrophe in China. People who remain in denial about the inherent destructiveness of agriculture typically point to China as a glowing example of 4,000 years of happy sustainable low-impact organic farming. Wrong, wrong, wrong! This chapter provides a powerful cure for those who suffer from such embarrassing naughty fantasies.

The late Victorian droughts happened at a time when the world population was less than 1.4 billion. Today, it's over 7 billion, and growing by 70 million per year. Cropland area per capita is shrinking, and soil health is diminishing. Energy prices are rising, and water usage for irrigation is foolishly unsustainable. We're getting close to Peak Food. World grain production per capita peaked in 1984, at 342 kilograms per person. World grain stocks (stored grain) peaked in 1986, and have been declining since then.

On 24 July 2012, the venerable Lester Brown of the Earth Policy Institute published a warning in *The Guardian*. "The world is in serious trouble on the food front." World grain stocks are currently "dangerously low." "Time is running out. The world may be much closer to an unmanageable food shortage — replete with soaring food prices, spreading food unrest, and ultimately political instability — than most people realize."

For me, the main message of this book was a powerful warning about the huge risks of agriculture, and its insanely destructive companion, overpopulation. The famines discussed in this book were not a freak event in history. Famine has been a common, normal, periodic occurrence in virtually all agricultural societies, from the Cradle of Civilization to today.

As the collapse of industrial civilization proceeds and life slows down, opportunities to live more in balance with nature will emerge. Clever societies will carefully limit population size, and phase out their dependence on farming. Un-clever societies will continue to breed like there's no tomorrow, beat their ecosystems to death, and hippity-hop down the Dinosaur Trail.

Atila Iamarino says

Uma história que nunca havia lido em outros livros, pelo que lembro, pelo menos. Mike Davis conta um pouco do que aconteceu no terceiro mundo (pelo menos na época) enquanto a colonização inglesa avançava. O livro traz uma discussão grande sobre o que acontece quando Governos e economia se fortalecendo entram em conflito com subsistência e quem não é interessante para economia ou votos. Com direito a uma passagem pelo Nordeste brasileiro no fim do século XIX.

Estou bem acostumado com a narrativa do capitalismo trazendo a prosperidade (de *The Wizard and the Prophet: Two Remarkable Scientists and Their Dueling Visions to Shape Tomorrow's World* a O otimista racional: Por que o mundo melhora), mas nunca tinha lido sobre o que pode dar errado. Quando o capitalismo traz fome. Até ver o que acontece quando a Inglaterra estende vias de comércio e linhas de trem

para a Índia e ingleses podem pagar mais pelo trigo do que os indianos. Só ingleses comem e a Índia passar por uma Fome enorme.
