

Book Review

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Late Victorian Holocausts: El Niño Famines and the Making of the Third World. By Mike Davis. 2001. Verso, London and New York.

The history of colonialism and imperialism of the 19th and 20th centuries, and their implications for the present, have generated heated discussion over the years. There are those that stress positive aspects, pointing to the creation of infrastructure such as ports and railroads, the development of a modern bureaucracy that could govern in a post-colonial world, and the introduction of new crops. Others have stressed harmful aspects that colonialism and imperialism had in the colonies and former colonies. Destruction of local industries (such as weaving in India) to help create markets for the products of the industrial revolution in Europe was common. Additionally, colonial and imperialist rulers commonly use 'divide and rule' tactics, creating or intensifying divisions along ethnic or religious lines by setting up one group (frequently a minority) as native rulers working under colonial jurisdiction. Mike Davis has written an ambitious book that stresses the disastrous effects that a combination of weather patterns and social and economic changes brought about by colonialism and imperialism had on hunger and famine through large swaths of globe. The book covers a vast amount of information across a number of disciplines. It attempts to synthesize and explain important historical occurrences and patterns, of continuing relevance to the modern world. How could the effects of these famines have been so severe and what lessons can we learn from those terrible events? The book is divided into four parts: (I) The Great Drought, 1876–1878; (II) El Niño and the New Imperialism, 1888–1902; (III) Deciphering ENSO [the El Niño–Southern Oscillation]; and (IV) The Political Economy of Famine. The first two parts deal extensively with drought-induced famines, made considerably worse because of the effects of colonialism and imperialism. The third part deals with the history and science behind the weather patterns that periodically brought drought to much of the Monsoon area of Asia, as well as other parts of the globe. The fourth part deals mainly with responses of the societies of India, China and Brazil to the combination of colonial heritage and weather patterns.

Capitalism evolved its defining characteristics during the 19th century. It developed as a world system, with a group of wealthy countries at the center and a larger group of countries—either 'deindustrialized' or hindered in their development—in the periphery. As Davis points out in *Late Victorian Holocausts*, 'the looms of India and China were

defeated not so much by market competition as they were forcibly dismantled by war, invasion, opium and a Lancashire-imposed system of one-way tariffs. (Already by 1850, imposed Indian opium imports had siphoned 11 percent of China's money supply and 13 percent of its silver stock out of the country.)' During this period, differences in wealth and living standards among countries emerged and then solidified. At the beginning of the 19th century, the general standard of living in what would become the industrialized core capitalist countries was not very different than that in India and China. By mid-century the tide had begun to change, and by 1900 a huge disparity had occurred—with household income in England approximately 21 times that in India. This was caused not only by an increase in income in England, but also a stagnation or actual decline of income in the what is now called the Third World.

Towards the end of the 19th century the pace of colonial takeovers and commercial penetration of poor countries quickened. It was at this time that a number of horrific famines occurred in widely dispersed locations around the globe—as far apart as India, China (especially the loess plateau of the Yellow River in the north-central part of the country) and the northeast of Brazil. Davis's book is devoted to the details of the climatic events that led to the famines, their human costs, why the famines were especially severe, the popular movements that developed in response to pauperization and the changes that occurred in the aftermath. Davis sees the immediate direct consequences of the climatic extremes, the deaths of millions of people, as especially severe because the ways in which villages and countries had traditionally protected their people from such natural disasters had been destroyed by colonialism and imperialism. The staggering devastation caused by the famines, in turn, left countries more susceptible to imperialist penetration. This process solidified the center-periphery order of exploitation that still exists in the early 21st century. Ecologists describe strong ecosystems as *resistant* to catastrophic events, such as torrential rains, and *resilient*—able to bounce back quickly when such events occur. Although not using this terminology, what Davis describes is the weakening of the social system and its conversion to one less able to absorb shocks and to recover from harmful events.

Shifts in patterns of surface water temperatures in the Pacific Ocean set off changes that, combined with other factors such as snow cover in the Himalayan mountains, modify global rainfall patterns. During the El Niño phase of the El Niño–Southern Oscillation (ENSO), a lessening or

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reversal in the westerly trade winds in the equatorial Pacific causes an eastward shift in the large, warm surface ocean pool that is one of the major zones for the development of clouds and monsoon rains needed for agriculture in important areas of the world. The upwelling of cold water along the Pacific coast of South America ceases and jet streams are displaced towards the equator. These events tend to cause drought in regions with normally good rainfall and torrential rains in normally arid zones, such as the coastal desert of Peru.

The weather changes set in motion by El Niño events in the late 1800s were severe and would have even been a challenge to societies well organized to deal with disasters. However, in the countries that Davis discusses—going into great detail on India, China, and Brazil, less so on others such as the Philippines—the societies were not able or willing to cope with the extent of the disaster. The magnitude of the human destruction in the Indian droughts of the late 1800s and the callousness of the British rulers—both described in some detail—is hard to fully comprehend. (Imagine someone in the midst of a human disaster saying that the free markets need to be relied upon to deal with the situation!) And when limited relief was finally provided, people had to move some distance from their villages and perform hard labor, while receiving a food ration lower than that given to prisoners doing hard labor at Buchenwald concentration camp during the Second World War. The droughts would have been bad enough if the traditional village system for grain storage and distribution had still existed. But the British had drawn India and China into the world capitalist system and commercial relationships had replaced traditional relationships. The British also raised funds—to finance their colonial activities in India and Afghanistan—by imposing taxes that were expected to be paid even during famines. This, of course, made things worse, for when people produce less during a drought, there is no real way to earn sufficient funds to pay taxes and purchase food at exorbitant prices. The situation was made even more critical by railroads being used to bring food *from* drought stricken areas into central storage facilities, hoarding causing prices to increase (causing exorbitant prices even in areas with sufficient production) and exports to England continuing to drain food from India (as the British also imported food from Ireland during the Irish potato famine). Additional factors included the British imposition of harsh taxes and failing to maintain traditional irrigation systems in India and compelling farmers to produce for the cash market products that could be exported—wheat, indigo, cotton, rice and, of course, the opium poppy which was forced on the Chinese people. Also making it difficult for people to survive the hard times in India were the British rules eliminating customary access to common resources ('Victorian enclosures')—forests as well as grazing lands. This made it harder to maintain livestock and to obtain firewood. With the social cohesion of Indian villages destroyed, it was not possible to organize communal activities that would benefit

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all, such as maintaining or improving local irrigation systems.

One way that Chinese peasants sometimes tried to deal with difficult times was to switch to cotton from growing cereal staple crops. In good years they could earn enough from selling cotton and cotton yarn and cloth (produced in the winter off-season with family labor) that they could survive off of their small plots of land. However, relying on cotton left northern Chinese peasants particularly vulnerable to droughts. Cotton is less forgiving of dry conditions and more reliant on early season rains than northern China's grain staples, sorghum and millet. Competition from foreign textiles reduced the potential of Chinese peasants to earn extra money from cottage-industry-scale spinning and weaving. Additional problems included the dwindling Chinese system of grain storage because of the financial stress of the Opium Wars, trade deficits resulting from forced opium imports, the Great Powers adoption of the gold standard in 1870s, as well as the mid-century civil wars and floods (including one that re-routed the Yellow River from entering the ocean in the Yellow Sea to the Gulf of Bohai). When disaster struck, even the use of cash (instead of stored grain) for relief could not solve the problem, because the available money couldn't keep up with the vast price inflation—there just wasn't enough locally available grain—and the difficulty of transportation to the famine areas made long-distance transport extremely expensive. Areas depopulated by deaths and migration at the times of the famines did not recover earlier population densities until the mid-20th century.

One of the outcomes of imperialism is the appropriation of resources (capital) from the periphery. Imperialist relations with India and China were especially useful to British businessmen. India was forced to be the market for products of British industry (textiles, electrical equipment, etc.) while the Indian imperialist venture was able to pay for these products by income from the sale of opium to China. This enabled Britain to import tea from China and to still have a surplus in its trade with Asia. An additional, perhaps unintended, consequence of these relationships was the development of classes within countries of the periphery, and famines provided a special opportunity for capital accumulation and solidifying internal class and caste lines. For example, under British rule an effective market in land developed in India. This enabled money-lenders (sometimes rich peasants)—who once had a stake in the survival of a peasant borrowing in times of famine—to accumulate land holdings if peasants weren't able to pay. Rich peasants also bought animals from drought-stricken peasants, for later sale in another region not so affected by drought. The crises also worked to force a portion of the peasantry into wage labor in order to survive the drought and/or the loss of their land.

This book could have used a final editing. There is some distracting repetition and so much detail on the famines that it is almost numbing. Because the text jumps around in time and geography, it is sometimes difficult to follow. The book

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would also have greatly benefited from a summary section at the end. Despite the shortcomings mentioned above, *Late Victorian Holocausts* is a very important book for those interested in agriculture and food security, partially because many of the same issues are with us today. While organizations such as the World Trade Organization might give the situation a somewhat different slant, the interests of the dominant-core wealthy countries have never stopped being a threat to feeding people in poor countries. As in the 19th century, farmers in the periphery today are also encouraged to produce crops for the export market instead of staples for their families, and as the imperialist relations at the end of the 19th century forced people into selling through limited marketing channels, agribusiness transnational corporations are currently tightening their grip on

the Third World and lessening farmers' options. Additionally, as market-oriented 'solutions' were proposed for famines in the 19th century, today the 'free market' is used as an excuse to reduce assistance, such as subsidies for fertilizer purchases, to farmers in poor countries. One of the important issues of the 21st century is how to keep people productively employed on the land in rural areas—to feed themselves as well as supply some family income. Active support and assistance by governments and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) will be essential to accomplish this goal.

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Author queries:

AQ1: Please give number of pages, ISBN number, hard/soft back, price details.

AQ2: Change 'important' to 'many'?

AQ3: Delete 'imposition of harsh taxes and' -repetition?

AQ4: 'might give it a different look' changed to 'might give the situation a different slant' - OK?