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USABLE PASTS?: RETHINKING HISTORIES OF EMPIRE AFTER 9/11 AND HURRICANE KATRINA[1]

DEFENDERS OF EMPIRE CAME OUT OF THE WOODWORKS in the immediate aftermath of 9/11. The most high-profile, outside of the Bush White House at least, was the historian Niall Ferguson whose writings filled newspaper opinion pages, urging Americans to emulate the British Empire by taking an active role in rebuilding global stability. Ferguson also narrated the history of the British Empire as a set of lessons for the present-day global hegemony. His books *Empire* and *Colossus* told stories of wise British imperial administrators who created the conditions for global economic integration and political and social stability in its far-flung possessions and dependencies. One of the key characteristics of the British exercise of global power was the strong sense of duty and responsibility felt and acted upon by the British elite. The most talented followed Rudyard Kipling's exhortation (actually addressed to the United States in the aftermath of 1898) to assume the "White Man's Burden."

For Ferguson, this commitment to empire is perhaps the most important lesson to be taken from his studies, for it is the strongest contrast with contemporary United States' hegemony. Unlike the British predecessors, American elites choose overwhelmingly to make rich careers for themselves in the private sector as bankers, lawyers, entrepreneurs and so on. Private wealth, not public duty, is the siren song of the most talented in the United States. Because of the priority of individual, private ambitions, the United States, in Ferguson's view, is unable to exercise global leadership successfully as the British had done in the nineteenth century. Lack of leadership has in turn created the conditions of international chaos and extreme economic hardship in many corners of the globe, producing movements like Al-Qaeda and disasters like the attack on the Twin Towers.

Manifold criticisms of Ferguson's latter day "White Man's Burden" were forthcoming immediately. Many dissented from his call for the United States to assume a more active role in the governance of other countries. Others disagreed with his depiction of British imperialism. Regarding this usable past, perhaps the most complete riposte had been published several years before Ferguson's histories. Now that the United States has suffered a second calamity of extreme proportions, Hurricane Katrina and the flooding of New Orleans, attention might return to this earlier work, Mike Davis' *Late Victorian Holocausts*, a quite different rendering of the effects of British rule and economic dominance in the nineteenth century.

Davis' work is a trenchant argument about how dramatic changes in regional climates interacted with formal and informal colonialism and the integration of the

[1] Mike DAVIS, *Late Victorian Holocausts: El Niño Famines and the Making of the Third World*. London: Verso, 2001; Niall FERGUSON, *Empire: The Rise and Demise of the British World Order and the Lessons for Global Power*. New York: Basic Books, 2003; and *Colossus: The Price of America's Empire*. New York: Penguin Press, 2004.

world market under British leadership at the end of the nineteenth century. The most novel and exciting innovation in this study is the author's focus on El Niño and La Niña events. El Niño and La Niña, also known as El Niño-Southern Oscillation (ENSO), are characterized by significant variations in the water temperature in the southern Pacific Ocean; El Niño events arise from a rise in temperature, La Niña from a drop. Interacting with other climatological factors such as the Indian and Chinese Monsoons, these temperature changes can produce drought or heavy rains, which can in turn lead to catastrophic flooding, famine, and epidemic diseases. In the last quarter of the nineteenth century, India and China suffered from especially devastating ENSO events that destroyed harvests for years at a time and lead to the death of literally millions of people. These catastrophes were echoed in the Brazilian Northeast, the *sertao*, a region "teleconnected" to the climate changes in the Pacific. In response, all three societies saw widespread utopian movements, such as the Boxer Rebellion in China and Antonio Consilheiro's settlement Canudos in the Brazilian Northeast, which sought to restore some sense of community and security in the face of economic collapse and the indifference or paralysis of political leadership.

As Hurricane Katrina has reminded us, disasters do not take place in a naked state of nature. They interact with complex human societies and political regimes. Davis, borrowing from Michael Watts, calls the analysis of these interactions "political ecology."[2] In Davis' view, ENSO events dovetailed with British rule in India and economic dominance in China and Brazil to devastating effect. In India, the Raj demanded strict adherence to liberal principles in the face of drought-produced agricultural collapse in the late nineteenth century, refusing to put a brake on market forces that impelled precious foodstuffs away from starving peasants and to metropolitan purchasers. In China and Brazil, integration into the British economic orbit, through massive investment in post-independence Brazil and the Opium Wars in China, gradually forced peasants away from subsistence agriculture and into the production of cash crops vulnerable to market fluctuations and ENSO-related events.

Among the consequences of these economic shifts was the alienation of large sectors of the peasantry from traditional forms of food security and famine relief as the moral economy crumbled. The British dismantled communal properties in India, severing the reciprocal bonds between peasants and elites traditionally mobilized to combat food shortages. In China, foreign economic penetration and military pressure weakened the Qing state, forcing it to divert resources away from public works projects and welfare programs. A government capable of provisioning its subjects during times of duress in the eighteenth century was impotent in the face of floods and famines in the nineteenth. "Informal colonialism" in Brazil, meanwhile, led not to modernization but to steep economic decline and social fragmentation in the

[2] Michael WATTS, *Silent Violence: Food, Famine, and Peasantry in Northern Nigeria*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983.

Northeast. Without incentives to diversify the economy beyond agricultural exports like coffee in the Southeast or cotton and sugar in the Northeast, Brazil was hostage to foreign markets. Downturns in the price of cotton, for instance, wreaked havoc among planters and peasants, driving the latter onto marginal lands and weakening their protection against famine. What Davis observes of India pertains to China and Brazil as well: "British policies, however Smithian in intention, were usually Hobbesian in practice." (p.339)

Davis and Ferguson thus posit quite different conclusions to their histories of British dominance. Ferguson believes that the balance sheet is in the Empire's favor:

> No one would claim that the record of the British Empire was unblemished. On the contrary, I have tried to show how often it failed to live up to its own ideal of individual liberty, particularly in the era of enslavement, transportation and the "ethnic cleansing" of indigenous peoples. Yet the nineteenth-century Empire undeniably pioneered free trade, free capital movements and, with the abolition of slavery, free labour. It invested immense sums in developing a global network of modern communications. It spread and enforced the rule of law over vast areas. Though it fought many small wars, the Empire maintained a global peace unmatched before or since. (p.358-9)

Moreover, by refusing to emulate the British and recreate this world, the United States is simply ignoring the reality of its place in the world:

> The empire that rules the world today is both more and less than its British begetter. It has a much bigger economy, many more people, a much larger arsenal. But it is an empire that lacks drive to export its capital, its people and its culture to those backward regions which need them most urgently and which, if they are neglected, will breed the greatest threats to its security. It is an empire that dare not speak its name. It is an empire in denial. (p.370)

Davis, in contrast, finds the imperial legacies crippling for much of the world in the formal and informal spheres of British dominance. The triumph of British imperialism represented, among other things, the "defeat of Asia." The political ecology of empire and ENSO events bequeathed not conditions of economic and political stability but what we now call the First and Third Worlds:

> As other historians have recently pointed out, when the Bastille was being stormed, the vertical class divisions inside the world's major societies were *not* recapitulated as dramatic income differences between societies. The differences in living standards, say, between a French *sans-culotte* and Deccan farmer were relatively insignificant compared to the gulf that separated both from their ruling classes. By the end of Victoria's reign, however, the inequality of nations was as profound as the inequality of classes. Humanity had been irrevocably divided. (p.16)

As Davis intimates, the world order of inequality in the present day is not so distant from the era of British dominance. The United States might very well have assumed the mantle of the British Empire by crafting policies that reproduce the distribution of wealth and poverty structured at the end of the nineteenth century. Davis' work would debunk the nostalgic yearnings of *Empire*. As we watch the response to Hurricane Katrina and the inundation of New Orleans, we are struck by the inequalities that these events have exposed and the harsher consequences for the poor and Black residents of the city, echoes of the Third World catastrophes that Davis chronicles. In this sense, Hurricane Katrina has unfortunately validated another of Ferguson's arguments: the failure of American political leadership and the headlong rush into private gain to the detriment of the public good. How does President Bush propose to pay for the massive cost of reconstruction on the Gulf Coast? Through budget cuts. He would make a British Viceroy proud.

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