

BOOK REVIEWS

**CRIMES AGAINST HUMANITY**

*The struggle for global justice*

GEOFFREY ROBERTSON QC

**THE LIE OF THE LAND**

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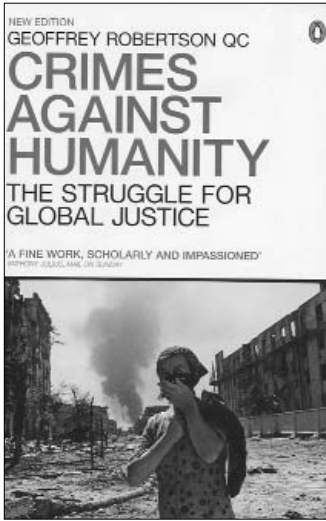
TONY BARNETT AND ALAN WHITESIDE

# BOOK REVIEWS

## CRIMES AGAINST HUMANITY

*The struggle for global justice*

GEOFFREY ROBERTSON QC  
Penguin Books, 2002



‘Crimes against humanity’ has quickly become a vogue phrase. Less clear is what the concept really means and how and by whom, those who commit these crimes can be brought to justice. Robertson’s main argument is that a new era has begun: one in which human rights, so often talked about, will now be enforced by a coalition of willing states.

The evidence Robertson cites is interesting and carefully explained. The trial of Milosevic, the al-Qaeda attacks in New York and the arrest of Chilean General Pinochet are all presented as steps along the way to a new approach to sovereignty and global justice. Seen on their own, world events of this sort may seem like isolated, unrelated events. Robertson, though, carefully draws together the consequences of NATO action in Kosovo, UN efforts in Indonesia regarding East Timor, and the processes in Sierra Leone, which may lead to an end to that conflict. As the author puts it:

“the human rights movement is on the offensive”.

When faced with the plethora of human rights organisations, declarations and resolutions, one may be inclined to think the battle against tyrants and their immunity from punishment is almost won. Robertson is under no such illusion and frequently steps away from the world of rhetoric into reality; hence the ‘struggle’ in the subtitle. Torture, murder, rape and starvation for political ends continue despite the best intentions of well-respected institutions working towards a utopian ideal of global peace and justice. Robertson, who has experience in Malawi, Mozambique and South Africa, seems to have first-hand experience of how ill equipped many of these institutions are to effect any sort of global justice. Few are spared Robertson’s critical eye: the Human Rights Committee is “a group of under-funded and politically partisan part-timers”, the African Commission of Human Rights is a “twice-yearly week of slapstick” and the UN “cheapens the human rights cause by recruiting voguish but vapid models and pop-stars as ‘goodwill ambassadors’”. Many of these views, written almost in anger, avoid the usual political correctness and are often refreshingly frank.

A particular strength of the book is the first six chapters that place recent events and decisions in context. Robertson gives as much of a history of the human rights movement as this sort of book allows. It is not meant as a reference for experts but as a guide to the processes of global justice that continue unseen to the average citizen except during brief televised crises. The history of rights as a human inheritance rather is a long tale whose twists and turns shed light on why we are where we are today. The hypocrisy and posturing in the international arena today are not new.

Revolutions, assemblies and wars of the past have shaped current attitudes to sovereignty and justice. *Crimes against humanity* gives a clear account of how debates have developed regarding freedom, universality and cultural relativism. The Nuremberg trials at the close of the Second World War are portrayed as crucial to the development of universal jurisdiction and as a precursor to the establishment of the International Criminal Court (ICC) in July 1998. Despite Robertson's reluctance to be optimistic about the future, his enthusiasm for the ICC shows that the struggle has its victories too.

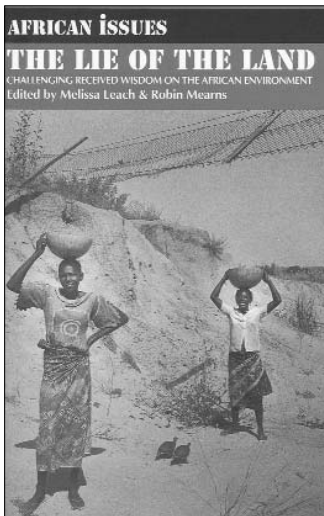
The new era of human rights enforcement may yet come to pass. The war against terror, waged by the US and its allies, may signal the end of many years of polite tolerance of tyrants and terrorists. This book, while making us aware of the dangers of a campaign against tyranny, concludes that it must be undertaken nevertheless, to show that governments capable of agreeing to rules are also capable of enforcing them.  
– AS

## THE LIE OF THE LAND

*Challenging received wisdom on the African environment*

MELISSA LEACH & ROBIN MEARNS (Eds)  
African Issues series

The International African Institute with James  
Currey and Heinemann, 2001



Popular views on environmental issues can be a strong force for good. The interest in the Rio Earth Summit and the Rio+10 Earth Summit, or World Summit on Sustainable Development, in Johannesburg is a good example of the resurgence of interest in responsible environmental practices. Unfortunately, many of the well intentioned popular views are misguided and often, wholly incorrect. This volume points out that many phenomena that appear to be 'self-evident' are in fact misleading. The perceived images of, for example, overgrazing and desertification, have often led to inappropriate solutions and plain bad policy. The trick is to examine the assumptions, which the editors of this volume do rather well.

Soil erosion is an area where many interests meet: the state wishes to allocate viable land for political reasons; the farming lobby wishes to exploit available land; and political groups want to promote land redistribution. Disputes are inevitable with each group gathering evidence that supports its own preferred outcome. Without being too technical, the chapter on soil erosion explains that the condition of the veld and its ability to provide grazing are more complex than originally thought. Politics, climate and individual farming practices all play a role.

Desertification is another strong image that has led policy makers to adopt policies contrary to the accumulated evidence. The chapter author, Jeremy Swift, explains clearly how perceived land degradation provides a reason for central governments, aid agencies and foreign states to extend their political and bureaucratic reach into these troubled regions. Swift suggests a more accurate use of environmental terminology and an analysis of who the potential winners and losers are in any suggested policy change.

In addition to Southern Africa, this volume also covers the 'forest-savanna mosaic' in West Africa, Forestry in Nigeria, 'Irrigation, Erosion and Famine' in Kenya and 'Paradigms and Politics' in Ethiopia. The chapters cover almost every landscape in Africa without losing sight of interesting individual case studies.

One such illuminating study is discussed by

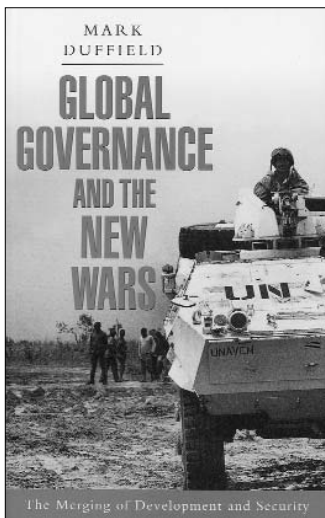
Michael Stocking in his chapter on soil erosion. Debunking the myth that everyone suffers when erosion occurs, Stocking shows how natural transfer of sediment enriches land at the bottom of a slope. Certainly, there is a loss to those higher up, but the process should be understood as one with winners as well as losers. In a similar vein, attempts to stop erosion through conservation do not always bring any direct economic benefits. The effort of building terraces and other structures should be justified by more than the satisfaction of completing another foreign funded aid project.

Together, the chapters of this volume appear to make a clear case for challenging received wisdom. The alternative approaches are sufficiently detailed to make comparison between the two possible. The inescapable conclusion is that an effort must be made to avoid establishing 'environmental orthodoxies' that represent the interests of specific groupings at the expense of many others. Research such as this makes bad policy easier to spot and more readily avoided. – AS

## GLOBAL GOVERNANCE AND THE NEW WARS

*The merging of development  
and security*

MARK DUFFIELD  
Zed Books, 2000



Development has many new meanings, some of them vague. But the consequences of a new approach to development are clear and understanding them is important. Mark Duffield's book shows convincingly that development policy has become more radical and ambitious. Those in the business of development believe that it can no longer be left to chance. Underdevelopment is viewed as a danger that must be remedied or removed, even if it means changing whole societies.

Duffield introduces his link between development and security in the context of the 'liberal peace': a "new or political humanitarianism that lays emphasis on such things as conflict resolution and prevention, reconstructing social networks, strengthening civil and representative institutions, promoting the rule of law, and security sector reform in the context of a functioning market economy". It is these priorities that form the base of aid policy toward the poor states of the world. This policy has become not simply a response to the needs of the poor but effectively "part of an emerging system of global governance".

Transforming the entire social system in any state is no easy task. The difficulty that NGOs and UN agencies encounter when confronting complex emergencies is testament to this. Transborder shadow economies and multiple zones of authority that develop in conflict zones make it improbable that governments of the North will succeed in their efforts to transform attitudes in the South.

Despite the many failures, Duffield argues that development experts remain optimistic. They take the view that by working out what went wrong last time, they can "get it better next time". Duffield lists two ways that failure is rationalised: first by labelling it as deviant and excluding it; or second, by viewing it as "an unfortunate but necessary price to pay for eventual progress". These should sound familiar to most NGOs who must inevitably strike a balance between donor satisfaction and a commitment to the community within which they work. Too often, it seems, agents of the liberal peace view complex political systems as complex humanitarian emergencies.

It is clear that the author has had the good fortune to have an insider's view on many aid operations. His writing on operations in Sudan shows a practical knowledge of the less theoretical aspects of aid policy. The descriptions are convincing and the criticisms specific and well argued. By dissecting the aid agencies approach and the actual consequences thereof, Duffield brings the obvious contradictions into sharp relief.

As is often the case, the book ends with a look at the decline of the nation state. In this case, however, Duffield avoids many of the usual laments and poses a challenge to the agents of the liberal peace: can "global liberal governance equal or better the relative security that existed for much of the Cold War when nation states had a greater regulatory influence?" Advocates of the UN, the International Criminal Court and world trade and finance agencies should take this seriously. It should not be taken for granted that the liberal order can impose any more peace than its predecessors. For Duffield, the real task is to reform the institutions and networks of global governance so that the complexities in the South do not turn liberal peace into liberal war. – AS

More than two decades after the HIV was recognised by the international community, understanding the disease has become something of an industry. Researchers and organisations have, however, tended to occupy themselves with concretising the extent and characteristics of the disease in an attempt to inform useful interventions. The focus has largely been on numbers and profiling the problem. Relatively few have considered either the underlying dynamics that left some countries more affected by the epidemic than others or the future implications of the disease in an increasingly interconnected world.

*AIDS in the twenty-first century: Disease and globalisation* begins to fill this gap by pulling together key research and thinking about the dynamics surrounding the disease. Thus, the authors argue, the:

book is about the social and economic impact of HIV/AIDS ... what we must learn from this global epidemic and what we must do. It is about the need to look beyond the individual to social and economic conditions, to see health as more than medicine, to understand concepts of 'well-being'. It is about the long-term effects of large scale death and illness as they will echo through our common history (p 3).

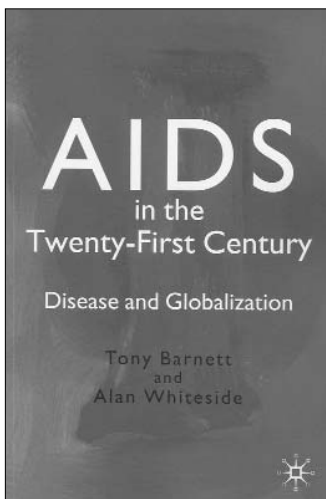
In tackling these complex and interrelated issues, the authors divide the book into three sections. The first section sets about describing the nature and extent of the disease, as well as the global response to the emerging epidemic. It describes some of the forces driving the pandemic and provides a comprehensive yet simple overview of the currently available prevalence statistics and trends, as well as a layman's summary of the virus's accepted epidemiology.

The second section moves on to examine the spread of the disease. By considering issues of 'susceptibility' and 'vulnerability' the authors examine the global and individual factors that have left some countries more affected by the HIV/AIDS epidemic than others. Central amongst these are global and national inequality and breakdown in social cohesion. Using these

## AIDS IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

*Disease and globalisation*

TONY BARNETT & ALAN WHITESIDE  
Palgrave Macmillan, 2002



concepts, they consider in detail possible reasons for the rapid spread of the disease in Africa, and sub-Saharan Africa in particular. Usefully, the section also details some of the caveats and questions that exist with regard to many of the data sources and statistical methods used in describing the epidemic. This provides a cautionary insight into the myriad of statistics cited in the HIV/AIDS-related literature.

In the third section, the authors turn their attention to how HIV/AIDS-related illness and death will impact on individuals, communities, selected sectors, national economies and governments, and the implications for notion of 'development'. Key issues discussed are the impact of the disease on children and the elderly, subsistence agriculture and rural livelihoods, 'for profit' enterprise, economic growth and governance. The section concludes with analysis of the international response so far to the epidemic and the lessons learned.

Overall, the book presents important

ideas and presents eloquently and thoroughly the arguments of emerging thinking around the impact of the disease on society. The authors are, however, (and they are not alone in this) constrained by the need to convey the severity of the disease, the novelty of their thinking, and a paucity of evidence. In this context, the book relies heavily on informed supposition and plausible hypotheses.

In common with virtually all of the literature on the impact of the epidemic, the authors must often resort to sweeping statements and 'worst case scenario' projections about the future of a world infected and affected by AIDS. This is not necessarily a problem as, in truth, no one can presently say with certainty what the implications of the disease will be. The book should, however, be read as an important contribution to an emerging literature, and as a starting point for more focused and nuanced testing of the arguments around the impact of HIV/AIDS. – *RP*