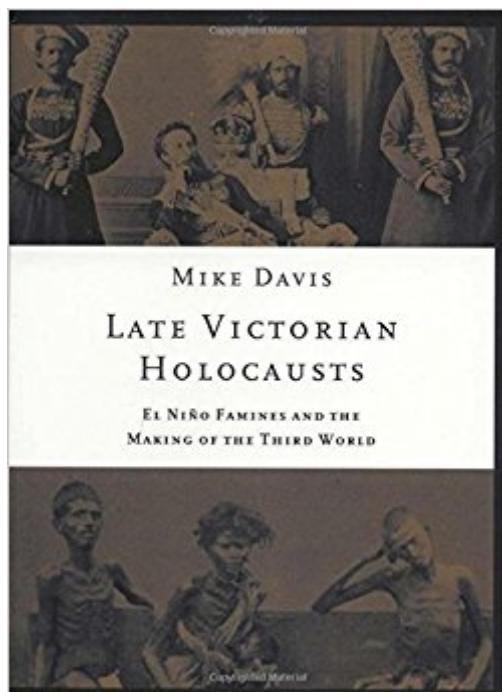


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Late Victorian Holocausts: El Niño Famines And The Making Of The Third World



Synopsis

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.

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Customer Reviews

While this book will not have the impact of Davis's *City of Quartz*--a scathing indictment of L.A.'s environmental ravagement, economic disparity and racial divides--in a perfect world, it would. Its subject is nothing less than the creation of what we now call "The Third World," through a complex series of seemingly disparate natural and market-related events beginning in the 1870s. Davis dives into the data and journalism of the period with a vengeance, showing that the seemingly unprecedented droughts across northern Africa, India and China in the 1870s and 1890s are consistent with what we now know to be El Niño's effects, and that it was political and market

forces (which are never impersonal, Davis insists), and not a lack of potential stores and transportation, that kept grain from the more than 50 million people who starved to death. Chapters brilliantly reconstruct the political, economic, ecological and racial climate of the time, as well as the horrific deaths by hunger and thirst that besieged the peasantries of the afflicted countries. As in *City of Quartz*, *Ecology of Fear* and *Magical Urbanism*, Davis's synthetic powers, rendering mountains of data into an accessible and cogent form, are matched by his acid castigations of the murders and moral failings that have attended the advance of capitalism, and by cogent detours into the work of journalists and theorists who have come before him, decrying injustice and rallying the opposition. (Feb.) Forecast: Although this book's historical subject seems vastly removed from contemporary American life, it may get some media attention for its El Niño-based arguments. *City of Quartz* still guarantees review attention for any Davis project, which may draw history buffs who haven't heard of him. His substantial core readership will seek out the book either way, and the book's synthesis of hardcore data will also hold appeal for poli-sci syllabi and university libraries.

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âœDavis has given us a book of substantial contemporary relevance as well as great historical interest â | this highly informative book goes well beyond its immediate focus.â • â "Amartya Sen, *New York Times* âœDavisâ™s range is stunning â | He combines political economy, meteorology, and ecology with vivid narratives to create a book that is both a gripping read and a major conceptual achievement. Lots of us talk about writing âœworld historyâ™ and âœinterdisciplinary historyâ™: here is the genuine article.â • â "Kenneth Pomeranz, author of *The Great Divergence* âœThe global climate meets a globalizing political economy, the fundamentals of one clashing with the fundamentalisms of the other. Mike Davis tells the story with zest, anger, and insight.â • â "Stephen J. Pyne, author of *World Fire* âœDavis, a brilliant maverick scholar, sets the triumph of the late-nineteenth-century Western imperialism in the context of catastrophic El Niño weather patterns at that time ... This is groundbreaking, mind-stretching stuff.â • â "Independent âœLate Victorian Holocausts will redefine the way we think about the European colonial project. After reading this, I defy even the most ardent nationalist to feel proud of the so-called âœachievementsâ™ of empire.â • â "Observer âœDevastating.â • â "San Francisco Chronicle âœGenerations of historians largely ignored the implications [of the great famines of the late nineteenth century] and until recently dismissed them as âœclimatic accidentsâ™ â | Late Victorian Holocausts proves them wrong.â • â "Los Angeles Times (Best Books of 2001) âœWide ranging and compelling â | a remarkable achievement.â • â "Times Literary Supplement âœA masterly

account of climatic, economic and colonial history.â • â "New Scientist â œA hero of the Left, Davis is part polemicist, part historian, and all Marxist.â • â "Dale Peck, Village Voice â œThe catalogue of cruelty Davis has unearthed is jaw-dropping â | Late Victorian Holocausts is as ugly as it is compelling.â • â "Sukhdev Sandhu, Guardian â œControversial, comprehensive, and compelling, this book is megahistory at its most fascinatingâ "a monument to times past, but hopefully not a predictor of future disasters.â • â "Foreign Affairs â œDevastating.â • â "San Francisco Chronicle

A *sui generis* history of mysterious meteorological cycles, the impact of international market integration on agrarian societies, and the tragedy of 30 to 60 million starved dead whose absence as an accumulated population from collective memory belies their importance in the scope of Europe's imperial ambitions. Harrowing, terrifying, important, and I hope not a harbinger of climate change impacts on global food security.

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 [http://www.johnlewis.com](#), 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. Richard Adrian Reese Author of *What Is Sustainable*

So much of the history of the third world just presents the desperate living conditions as something that has always existed in that part of the world and always will. It is so well known and described that it is just assumed that there is nothing that can be done about it and that it is the fault of the tropical environment and the backwards people that live in it. Davis's *Late Victorian Holocausts* shows that this is not the case at all. Yes there have been devastating long-term droughts and excessive rainfall that has made farming and life in general very difficult in these areas. But it is not acts of God that deserve the blame for the wide spread deaths in these areas. As Davis argues very clearly these societies have dealt with droughts and monsoons for centuries and had an infrastructure set up to deal with it. This infrastructure was dismantled (more often than not deliberately) by imperial forces that set up a system for maximum wealth extraction from these regions. As Davis demonstrates especially in the case of India, the development that was done was not done for the benefit of the people but rather for the extraction of wealth. *Late Victorian Holocausts* also does a

very good job of debunking assumptions that China and India are burdened by their excessive populations and that this is to blame for most of their economic underdevelopment. But the fact is these countries have dealt with these issues for a long time and had the infrastructure to deal with it. Davis does an excellent job of opening the book with an interesting and relevant antecedent of former president Grant's travels thorough some of the drought stricken areas. And while the book is an academic book, it is well written and is not a bad read for the general reader either. If there was one complaint that I had about the book it is that the 3rd part dealing with deciphering El Nino climate patterns was way too much and really not relevant to the rest of the book. If the author's main argument is that the main source of the famine problems was manmade policy decisions rather than climate, why bother spending 40 pages on an exhaustively detailed description of how El Nino was discovered. In fact, after discussing it in those sections it is only referred to in passing thorough out the rest of the book. I would recommend that unless you are just fascinated with climate science you just skim this section it will not take away from the overall argument of the book. This one shortcoming aside this is a fascinating and well written book and I definitely recommend it.

Late Victorian Holocausts is a double investigation, first of the role played by ENSO, the El Nino Southern Oscillation which affects much of the world's weather in the devastating famines which marked the late nineteenth century, and secondly of the role European (primarily British) imperialism took in deepening those famines. Thus part of the book is a scientific study of ENSO, while the rest is a chronicle of the horrendous suffering in India, China, and Brazil. Even if you are familiar with the typical nineteenth century European Social Darwinist free trader ideology, the callousness of the attitudes of British viceroys and plenipotentiaries towards the suffering Indian and Chinese peasants is breathtaking. Similarly, the arrogant disregard of the sufferings of the Brazilians by their government is beyond belief. In contrast with the insouciance of the Europeans when faced with disaster, Davis provides some fascinating information proving that earlier famines in India and China before imperialism weakened their societies were dealt with swiftly and humanely, with a fine regard for easing suffering and preserving human life. The most important message of this book is that much of today's Third World is the direct result of natural disaster augmented by human indifference.

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