

Ecology & Imperialism

JASON W. MOORE

Mike Davis, *Late Victorian Holocausts: El Niño Famines and the Making of the Third World* (London and New York: Verso, 2001), 470 pages plus photos and maps, cloth \$27.00, paper \$20.00.

What do we mean by that felicitous phrase, “ecological imperialism”? Some fifteen years ago, Alfred W. Crosby published what was destined to become a seminal text of environmental history, *Ecological Imperialism*. Early European expansion, Crosby argued, was accompanied by the global diffusion of Eurasian plants, diseases, and animals, especially in the New World. Ecological imperialism was about the displacement of indigenous ecologies in favor of biological “neo-Europes.” But for all its promise, in subsequent years neither Crosby nor subsequent environmental historians moved beyond the diffusionist and ecologically-reductionist conception of imperialism. The idea of ecological imperialism remained narrowly ecological, abstracted from capitalist social relations.

The appearance of Mike Davis’ *Late Victorian Holocausts* marks a distinct rupture with such toothless renderings of ecological imperialism. Taking as his starting point the El Niño droughts that swept through China, India, Brazil, and much of Africa in the late nineteenth century, Davis argues that the “third world” was created by imperial strategies that deliberately turned drought into famine. The death toll ran to the tens of millions. Davis’ great insight is to explain how these socially-engineered famines—likely the world’s greatest ecological crisis since 1492—were a decisive wedge in a new global phase of primitive accumulation. “The great Victorian famines were forcing houses and accelerators of the very socio-economic forces that ensured their occurrence in the first place” (p. 15). The outcome was a quantum leap in global inequality, as

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the imperial refashioning of third world ecologies and societies effected a dramatic extension of capitalist social relations in the periphery, in China and India above all.

Late Victorian Holocausts' theoretical architecture is decidedly minimalist. Expressing his admiration for geographer Michael Watts' classic study of subsistence crises in northern Nigeria, *Silent Violence*, Davis aligns himself with a broadly defined "political ecology" perspective, so-called "because it takes the viewpoint of environmental history and Marxist political economy" (p. 15). But this is as far as he is willing to go. Davis has a story to tell, and to that end enlists several broad orienting concepts. Chief among these is Rosa Luxemburg's conception of imperialism—focusing on the incorporation of extra-European societies into the world capitalist system—and her emphasis on the role of "force as a permanent weapon" in the construction of capitalist markets (pp. 11–12). Markets, Davis tells us in a not-so-subtle reference to contemporary neoliberalism, "are always 'made'. Despite the pervasive ideology that markets function spontaneously...they in fact have inextricable political histories" (p. 11). It is precisely this political history of the late nineteenth century world market—with its massive ecological toll in human bodies and landscapes alike—that Davis lays bare.

Late Victorian Holocausts is part narrative history, part "scientific detective story" (p. 213), and part analytical world history. In the first half, Davis walks us through a narrative history of primitive accumulation and famine in the tropical world that accompanied the two major El Niño (short for El Niño-Southern Oscillation, or ENSO) droughts of the late nineteenth century (1876–1878; 1888–1902). This is followed by a remarkable (if at times distracting) history of the search for El Niño, and the ways that ENSO's interaction with the "world climate system" helps to shape "climates of hunger" (p. 239). Finally, Davis develops an important argument about the "origins of the third world" (p. 279). The late nineteenth century's ENSO droughts were no mere footnote. Rather, ENSO-driven climate change intersected with a century-long erosion of precapitalist state structures and the simultaneous expansion of commodity production and exchange, especially in South and East Asia. Famine, immiseration, and ecological crisis ensued, their lasting effects found in today's extreme global inequality.

Mike Davis makes several big contributions in *Late Victorian Holocausts*—although in the absence of a theoretical reprise these may be missed. In the first instance, the book demands a serious rethinking of traditional conceptions of imperialism and underdevelopment. Davis

begins with an essentially Wallersteinian riff on Luxemburg's theory of imperialism, stressing "tropical humanity[']s...forcible incorporat[ion] into [the] political and economic structures" of the "modern world-system" (p. 9). His great advance is to extend and deepen the Luxemburg-Wallerstein approach by insisting on the relation between exogenous environmental factors (climate change), the political economy of Britain's world hegemony, and the environmental history of worldwide primitive accumulation. If world-systems and dependency perspectives have tended to reduce imperialism to its politico-economic moment, *Late Victorian Holocausts* reveals the environmental history of underdevelopment; indeed, it suggests that underdevelopment is inexplicable in the absence of an ecological critique. The El Niño droughts of the later nineteenth century contributed to the cumulative woes of societies—India and China especially—already buckling under the pressure of colonial rule and imperialist war. British imperialism variously and radically undermined the capacity of Asian states to protect their populations from famine, as they had in previous centuries.

World history and environmental history share a strong tendency to explain socio-ecological change in terms of markets. Studies informed by the imperialism and underdevelopment perspective are especially prone to such circulationism. But *Late Victorian Holocausts* is neither circulationist nor productionist. Moving easily between local transformations of land and labor to the global accumulation of capital, Davis' approach comes much closer to what Marx once called the "organic whole" of production and exchange. *Late Victorian Holocausts* paints a picture that forces us to think through Imperial Britain's violent construction of a world market at multiple scales, the degradation and transformation of living environments, and resistance to imperialism—all as mutually relational and formative moments in a single world-historical process.

This becomes crystal clear in Davis' illuminating discussion of something seemingly far-removed from environmental history—the Gold Standard. Adopted by Britain in 1821, most of the developed and nearly-developed world followed suit in the 1870s. As a result, "[v]ast quantities of demonetized silver flooded the world market, depreciating the currency of India and China, the major nations outside the hegemonic gold bloc" (p. 303). Under British domination and the new Gold Standard, the value of India's silver-standard rupee fell by over one-third between 1873 and 1895.

The consequence? Inflation (silver's depreciation) destroyed peasant savings and pushed peasant households into a usurious credit system.

The Gold Standard “greatly abetted” the Empire’s century-long efforts—whose principal forms included a tax system that took much and gave little, and the malign neglect of hydraulic infrastructure—to push the Indian peasantry into the production of cash crops such as wheat, cotton, jute, and opium (p. 304). Among Davis’ contributions is to show that this world-historical moment of primitive accumulation was ecological and economic in equal measure. With the aim of expanding commodity production, Britain’s mutually reinforcing policies dramatically undermined village and regional ecologies, rendering peasant society profoundly vulnerable to unfavorable climate change. In India alone, famine and famine-related disease took seven million lives in the 1870s; nineteen million in the 1890s; and another two to three million in the following decade.

These imperial policies sustained Britain’s world hegemony at time when it faced rising competition from its rivals, the United States and Germany especially. Indian wheat subsidized British economic development, particularly following the “crisis of English agriculture in the late 1870s” (p. 298). The mid-century proliferation of Indian cash-cropping and exports enabled Britain’s “commercial domination of China,” which in turn “allowed her to sustain...large deficits with the United States, Germany, and the White Dominions” (pp. 299, 297). And finally, India financed not only the British-centered world-economy, but the military power that sustained it. In every instance, India’s capacity to protect itself against famine was undermined: household savings were destroyed, subsistence-production undermined, colonial state budgets reoriented from maintaining ecological infrastructures in favor of imperialist adventures.

If we are persuaded by this environmental history of Britain’s hegemony, what then do we make of the book’s central question? Are the origins of the third world found in these late nineteenth century transformations? Yes and no. In this instance, I think we would do best to follow the spirit rather more than the letter of Davis’ interpretation. While the incorporation of South and East Asia into the world system was indisputably crucial to the development of capitalism in the following century, this argument may obscure earlier, but no less epochal transformations. Here I am thinking especially of the epochal remaking of world ecology that occurred in the “long” sixteenth century, ranging from the “Columbian exchange” and its apocalyptic disease vector, to the wide-ranging impact of sugar monocultures, to the reorganization of regional socio-ecologies around silver mining centers. The world-histor-

ical inequalities—globalizing if not (yet) globalized—forged during this era of capitalist transition were indispensable to capital accumulation in ways quite similar to the transformations Davis details. Imperialism and global inequality in the capitalist era have remarkable continuities, but also significant discontinuities. The “third world” was created not once but many times. The “global rift” between core and periphery has been made and remade in successive eras of capitalist development, always on a progressively globalized scale.

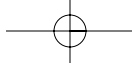
With *Late Victorian Holocausts*, Davis begins and ends with a staple of anti-imperialist historical inquiry: Britain sustained its world power in the late nineteenth century through the subordination of the tropical world to capitalist imperatives. His great contribution is to situate these developments in terms of environmental change and environmental transformation. Davis shows how the British Empire organized and maintained its global hegemony on the basis of a massive reordering of world ecology, and that this was driven by, and constituted new conditions for, capital accumulation on an ever-extended scale. This moment of British imperialism had everything to do with the displacement of local *moral ecologies* in favor of capitalist *political ecologies*. This generated socio-ecological relations of production that favored capital accumulation in far off places at the expense of ecological sustainability, *including* the “sustainability” of human beings who lived in this emergent third world. That Davis makes his case without resorting to narrow and fetishized conceptions of industrialization, commercialization, or population growth—instead advancing a layered and historically-sensitive conception of capitalism’s political economy—immediately sets this study apart from the main trends in environmental history. That he does so by advancing a perspective on imperialism that places ecology at the center, at the same time resisting the temptations of ecological reductionism, makes *Late Victorian Holocausts* a landmark contribution to the understanding of the capital-nature antagonism, and a potentially important weapon in the struggle for social justice and ecological sanity.

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On the Role of the UN and U.S. Allies in U.S. Occupied Iraq

“We didn’t take on this huge burden [the occupation of Iraq],” Mr. Powell told Congress last week, “not to be able to have significant, dominating control.”

—*Economist*, April 5, 2003, p. 32



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