

In the last two decades, no other ideas have gained the totemic status that ‘democracy’ and ‘human rights’ have attained in global and African public policy and political discourses. From Cameroon to Kenya, democracy and human rights were the rallying cries of the 1990s reform movements that have radically reshaped the politics of most African states. While ridiculed and rejected as Western impositions by many African leaders (many of them relics of the Cold War), the indigeneity of the voices for democracy and human rights were never in doubt, particularly among the victims of injustice and misrule in Africa.

Nevertheless, it is important to remember that no matter how benign, ideas and concepts are always intertwined with power and the values of their promoters; that, indeed, every idea and concept, and even more so those which speak the language of liberation and freedom, should be subjected to critical analysis. This is the meaning of Issa Shivji’s caution, long before the onset of the ‘Democracy and Human Rights’ in the 1990s, that the idea of human rights in Africa was not politically innocent (Shivji 1989: vii).

We need to dispense with a possible preliminary misconception, however. The approach of this paper is not a rejection of the well intentioned promotion of democracy and human rights in Africa by Western activists, academics or even states. Far from it. Indeed, the work of committed activists and ordinary Westerners who support groups such as Amnesty International can only be applauded. In many places in Africa, pro-democracy and human rights work has gained immensely form grants by Western governments.

However, democracy and human rights are promiscuous concepts, sometimes appropriated by the powerful and recruited for morally problematic ‘causes. Good ideas can also end up serving bad ends when their theoretical deployment is not sufficiently rigorous. That is the problem with the recent work on democracy by Paul Collier, professor of economics at Oxford University. Collier’s *Wars, Guns & Votes* is troubling because it takes to a new extreme some of the ideas that have steadily gained currency in international development and humanitarian discussions on Africa and the developing world (Collier 2009a). Collier’s focus is what he calls the countries of the ‘bottom billion’, largely Sub-Saharan Africa and some Asian countries (Collier 2009a: 1). His argument is that these post-colonial countries are structurally insecure and structurally unaccountable. They lack social cohesion as they are too large to be nations and too small to efficiently produce basic goods such as security that are the responsibility of states (Collier 2009a: 9).

In Collier’s view, the experimentation with democracy in these countries has failed and ‘[i]n promoting elections, the rich, liberal democracies have basically missed the point’ (Collier 2009a: 49). The elections that the ‘international community’ has assiduously promoted have merely driven these countries to a cul-de-sac of violence and insecurity that they cannot extricate themselves from. Collier’s prescription is, therefore, simple: the international community has

to step in and take on the burden of providing and guaranteeing security for these countries. The international community can do this by investing more in international peacekeeping and intervening militarily. He concludes that the threat of military coups should be used against those leaders who steal elections and jeopardize democracy- what he euphemistically refers to as the harnessing of ‘the potent force of domestic violence for good’ (Collier 2009a: 231).

Collier’s book is important for several reasons. First, its author is a highly regarded international expert on development who is regularly called upon to advise international multilateral institutions that support African development. He is also professor of economics at Oxford University and the Director of the Centre for the Study of African Economies, where he is producing the next generation of experts for Western foreign ministries and for international organizations. What he, therefore, proposes will come to influence events and policies in the developing world.

Second, it is important to address the arguments raised by Collier because they are part of a set of influential ideas on the question of the use of military force by the West for humanitarian purposes in the non-Western world. Because bad ideas have the tendency of contaminating good ones faster than the good ones can cleanse the bad, it is important that we inoculate the good by robustly confronting the bad.

In 2000, a Canadian government-led initiative led to the constitution of the International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty to examine the dilemma posed by UN Secretary General Kofi Annan on the international community’s response to systematic and widespread human rights violations in the face of state sovereignty. The Commission, co-chaired by former Australian Foreign Minister Gareth Evans and Special Advisor to UN Secretary General Mohammed Sahnoun coined and popularised the idea of ‘Responsibility to Protect’ (International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty 2001). In their argument, sovereign states have the primary responsibility to protect their citizens against catastrophe. In the event they are unable or unwilling to do so, however, the community of states has the responsibility to provide that protection.

‘Saving Africa From Dangerous Ideas’

Mutuma Ruteere

Wars, Guns, and Votes: Democracy in Dangerous Places

by Paul Collier

Bodley Head (London), 2009, 255 pages, \$26.99

Most policy and international affairs experts understood that argument to apply to contexts of mass slaughter or genocide, similar to what happened in Rwanda in 1994. In practice, however, the appetite for the use of Western military force to ‘do good’ in the developing world has been growing with new grounds for ‘humanitarian intervention’ being promoted in policy think-tanks and academic circles.

What has come to be known as ‘humanitarian intervention’ gained ascendancy in policy and academic circles in the West following NATO’s intervention in Kosovo in 1999. The failure of the international community to decisively act to prevent the Rwanda genocide in 1994 has also heavily influenced the discussion surrounding the use of military force to ‘save strangers’ faced with the peril of genocide or mass slaughter.

Filtered through the language of morality and ethics, this new form of humanitarianism rejects any suggestion that it is imperialistic. In fact, Paul Collier, writing in the July/August 2009 issue of the *Boston Review*, has sharply rejected this criticism by fellow economist William Easterly of New York University that his advocacy of military intervention to ‘promote democracy’ in poor countries is not even ‘neo-colonialism’, but full-blown and old-fashioned ‘colonialism’ (Collier 2009b; Easterly 2009).

By speaking in the name of universal humanity, this military humanitarianism has allowed humanitarian and human rights actors, development experts and even old-fashioned empire-builders to find common cause in the use of the weapons of war in “rescuing” others. It has also led to a conceptual shift in the principles of humanitarianism. Where, in the past, the humanitarian movement stressed its neutrality in contexts of armed conflict, certain sections of the humanitarianism movement now advocate the use of military force in the name of humanity. In fact, the earliest advocate of an international ‘right to intervene’ is Bernard Kouchner, the founder of the charity, Médecins sans Frontières, who is currently the French Foreign Minister.

However, the humanitarian justification advanced by scholars like Paul Collier is not necessarily accepted in those countries where military interventions take place. Certainly, it was not accepted in Iraq, even though some in official Washington and advocacy circles pushed the argument. Having failed to stop the United States from invading Iraq, the UN’s attempt to be part of the post-war normalization and reconstruction of the country was seen

by the insurgents as an attempt to legitimize the US military intervention. In 2003, the UN headquarters in Baghdad was attacked and its representative, Sergio Vieira de Mello, was among those killed.

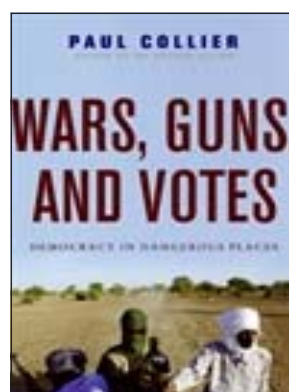
The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), universally known as the very symbol of humanitarian neutrality, was also attacked in Iraq in 2003. In his book, *The Humanitarians*, David Forsythe, a leading expert on the ICRC, has pointed out that the ICRC was well known in Iraq, having operated in the country since the days of the Iran-Iraq war (Forsythe 2005). The reason the ICRC was targeted this time was because it was no longer seen as neutral – the consequence of the erosion of the idea of neutral humanitarians. Forsythe notes:

The ICRC was probably attacked for the same reason the UN headquarters had been attacked some weeks earlier, leading to the death of Sergio de Mello, the Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General in Iraq, among others. No matter how much the UN or the ICRC might try to signal that they were separate from the US-led coalition forces, for example by not fortifying their in-country headquarters, their work for the Iraqi people dovetailed with US objectives. In working for humane conditions for the Iraqi people, the ICRC inherently contributed to the US strategic objective of a stable Iraq under a new regime. Those carrying out the attacks most likely wanted chaos, disorder, insecurity – at least for a period – to rid the country of foreign occupation before a new pro-western regime was secure. Probably for these same reasons, the head of CARE in Iraq was kidnapped by unknown persons in the fall of 2004 (Forsythe 2005: 99).

Conor Foley, writing in the UK *Guardian* in May 2004, has noted that in places like Iraq and Afghanistan, ‘the humanitarian emblems’ designed to protect NGOs and other humanitarian actors, are now identified ‘as legitimate targets’ (Foley 2004). Those who attacked the humanitarian agencies and the United Nations saw them as extensions of the American military mission.

Developments experts and humanitarian actors who continue to assume that their mission in such contexts is not serving the interests of intervening state only delude themselves. At the onset of the war in Afghanistan, the US Secretary of State Collin Powell was clear that he regarded NGOs as subcontractors to the US mission, noting that ‘NGOs are such a force multiplier for us, such an important part of our combat team ... [that we are] all committed to the same, singular purpose to help humankind....’ (Brauman and Salignon 2004: 269-70). Even such ardent liberal Western supporters of the war in Iraq such as the Canadian scholar and politician Michael Ignatieff have concluded that the humanitarian governance imposed after intervention is ‘imperial because it requires imperial means: garrison troops and foreign civilian administrators, and because it serves imperial interests’ (Ignatieff 2003: 59).

Moreover, while the politics of human rights and humanitarian rescue



may be constructed in the language of shared humanity, the western-non-western moral encounters mask what human rights scholar Makau Mutua has called ‘a subtext that depicts an epochal context pitting savages, on the one hand, against victims and saviours, on the other.’ (Mutua 2001: 201). In this ‘savages-victims-saviors’ metaphor, the savage is the non-western state or culture, its citizens the victims, with the western states, NGOs, activists and institutions as the savior. The metaphor involves the reduction of those rescued into flat, cardboard figures of object and sympathy, Mutua concludes.

A basic characteristic of the victim is powerlessness, an inability for self defense against the state or culture in question. The usual human rights narrative generally describes victims as hordes of nameless, despairing and dispiriting masses. To the extent that they have a face, it is desolate and pitiful. Many are uneducated, destitute, old and infirm, young, poorly clad, and/or hungry. Many are peasants, the rural and urban poor, marginalized ethnic groups and nationalities, and lower castes, whose very essence is a state of divorce from civilization and a large distance from modernity (Mutua 2001: 229).

Humanitarian intervention coming to the ‘rescue’ of these powerless people is rarely cast as an arena of power but of morality. Yet ‘rescuing’ the ‘powerless’ also constructs the interveners as the ‘powerful’, the ‘good guys’ in their own eyes and in the eyes of the victims. It is a morality and power play that precludes any discussions on interests or the historical and political implication of the interveners in the misery of the victims. On this power play, Coustas Douzinas writes:

Pity and a sense of superiority unite humanitarians. The massive pity engineered by humanitarian campaigns supports Western superiority, increases distanciation from its targets and breeds disdain. Pity is addressed by a superior to an inferior, it is the patronizing emotion of looking down at the person pitied. The human rights campaigner as rescuer can become deeply egotistical: he is the one who keeps the world together and, as a bonus, he receives full recognition for his goodness by others from close and afar (Douzinas 2007: 75).

Most arguments for military intervention to solve the problems of bad governance in Africa and other parts of the developing world are often predicated on a stunning disregard for the complex politics of nation-building. Keen to convince a skeptical official West to intervene, most of the interventionists like Paul Collier reduce the complex political dynamics of African conflicts into simple morality tales of good versus evil.

With regard to the 2007 contentious Kenyan elections, Collier concludes that the evil of ethnicity inevitably led 98 per cent of the Luo to vote for their ethnic kin, Raila Odinga (now Prime Minister in the coalition government), and likewise the Kikuyu to vote for incumbent Mwai Kibaki (now President) to a person. In his view, if of all African countries, Kenya could not hold credible elections, not much should be expected of the rest of Africa (Collier 2009a: 203) Collier is not

alone in viewing ethnicity as Africa’s destiny. Many analysts share the view that ethnicity is the basic identity of most Africans and not the nation-state. This reasoning often ignores the fact that the ethnic group in its political understanding in Africa is to a considerable extent a product of the modern African state; that, for most Africans, the most relevant social and cultural unit outside the family is likely to be the clan rather than the ethnic group. Ethnic groups gain relevance when they are recruited for political exclusion or competition for access to state resources. In other words, ethnicity is actually a consequence rather than the cause of such political behaviour as voting.

The weakness here is that ethnicity is really a description and less of an explanation. While a commendable attempt to link academic analysis to policy, Collier’s policy prescriptions rest on rather shaky theoretical premises. The Western donor support to the democratic enterprise in Africa and other developing countries does not necessarily yield positive results. This point has been eloquently argued by William Easterly, a former World Bank economist. According to Easterly, Western aid ‘doesn’t have a great record on improving matters, on making governments do the “right” thing’ (Easterly 2006: 128). To succeed, democracy should not be imagined externally, as Collier does.

The argument here is not that there can never be grounds for outsiders to intervene in African countries to avert genocide or mass slaughter. The thinking informing the International Commission that popularised the ‘responsibility to protect’ is sound. African states have also gained important expertise and experience in creatively addressing war and violence on the continent. Unfortunately, there is often a knee-jerk attempt to ignore or underplay the achievements by the African Union and other regional efforts in responding to African crises. Paul Collier, for instance, suggests that the British intervention in Sierra Leone war is the model for what the West can do for Africa, but ignores the intervention by Nigeria which for almost a decade committed its forces and resources to avert complete collapse in both Sierra Leone and Liberia. Likewise, he makes no mention of the South Africa-led Southern Africa Development Community’s intervention in Lesotho in 1998 to reverse a military coup. Of course, long before humanitarian intervention became fashionable concept, Tanzania had sent its military into Uganda in 1978 to stem Idi Amin’s reign of terror.

In fact, regional states have shown greater willingness to put their soldiers at risk whenever they intervene militarily or undertake peacekeeping activities (Adebajo 2002). In his book, *Shake Hands with the Devil*, General Romeo Dallaire, who was commander of the UN Mission in Rwanda at the time of the 1994 genocide, notes that his best troops were the Ghanaians and the Tunisians (Dallaire 2003).

Since the argument of interventionists such as Paul Collier stands on a premise of an Africa that is incapable of solving its problems, they tend to ignore whatever progress Africa and the developing world has made. Economist

Edward Miguel of University of California at Berkeley concludes that Collier’s ‘premise that the poorest countries cannot grow ignores a decade of modest successes’ (Miguel 2009). To study Africa as though everything about its history is an unbroken catastrophe is not useful to African struggles for better governance, development and human rights. Surely, the democratizations struggles of the 20th Century are important indigenous developments. If Tanzania managed to forge a nation out of a diversity of its peoples, on what credible basis can one conclude that Africa’s diversity is its curse?

To prescribe the threat of military coups as a tool for enhancing good governance in Africa, as Paul Collier suggests, is to return the developing world to a past it is still struggling to free itself from. The military coup as a means of ascending into power is now discredited in Africa. The African Union has been emphatic on this. It is not a solution to disputed elections in Zimbabwe, Kenya or elsewhere. After the contentious 2000 presidential elections, the United States had to reach into the recesses of its own systems and institutions to rectify that problem. Curiously, Paul Collier is silent on whether a military coup should have been encouraged in the United States in

2000, as he proposes for cases such as Kenya’s 2007 elections. William Easterly makes the point succinctly. The West should not ‘reward bad governments by working through them, but don’t try to boss them around or overthrow them either’ (Easterly 2006: 138). Between 2003 and 2009, Benin, Ghana, Lesotho, Mauritius, Mozambique, South Africa and Zambia all held successful and peaceful elections judged as free and fair by most observers. This point appears to be lost in Collier’s analysis.

The ascendancy of the discourse on security which is often collapsed into development, as Collier does in his work, should also concern Africans and others in the developing world. While it is important to view security as a right that the state should guarantee, security is not the basis for all rights. The temptation to ‘securitize rights’ – to view all other rights and social needs through the lens of security – should be treated with caution (Lazarous and Goold 2007). Otherwise, in the name of ‘providing security’, the developing world and Africa in particular will have opened itself up for military adventurism. States still act in their selfish interests in international affairs. Pure humanitarian motive is a good idea, but to act as though that idea is the reality is very unwise.

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Note

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