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Saving Lives: A First Step Toward Freedom Not Dependence

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Saving Lives: A First Step Toward Freedom Not Dependence

Abstract

During the nineteenth century, European powers extended and deepened their brutal domination of the so-called “uncivilized” (sic) nations and peoples around the world. These efforts were named “colonialist” and were based on the uprooting of indigenous peoples, the export and pillage of natural resources, cultural displacement, direct political control, and economic exploitation and the creation of dependency by the Europeans. While the European states gained colossal economic benefits from these arrangements, the colonized peoples were left with failed states and bad governments. Advocates of these colonialist policies often justified these actions on the basis of a deep-felt ideological belief in the superior morality of the West and the need to take up the “white man’s burden.”

Keywords

Human rights, Humanitarian aid, Colonialism, Development

Saving Lives: A First Step Toward Freedom Not Dependence

by William F. Felice

During the nineteenth century, European powers extended and deepened their brutal domination of the so-called “uncivilized” (sic) nations and peoples around the world. These efforts were named “colonialist” and were based on the uprooting of indigenous peoples, the export and pillage of natural resources, cultural displacement, direct political control, and economic exploitation and the creation of dependency by the Europeans. While the European states gained colossal economic benefits from these arrangements, the colonized peoples were left with failed states and bad governments. Advocates of these colonialist policies often justified these actions on the basis of a deep-felt ideological belief in the superior morality of the West and the need to take up the “white man’s burden.”

So who, according to Michael Cohen, Maria Küpçü and Parag Khanna, are the “new colonialists” of the 21st century? I first thought that perhaps the title of their *Foreign Policy* article (“The New Colonialists”) might be referring to Russia’s attempt to exert political and economic control over the Commonwealth of Independent States. Or, if not Russia, perhaps the authors would label the Chinese efforts to expand their political, cultural, and economic clout throughout African, Asia and Latin America as colonialist. And if not Russia or China, the last option, I thought, was for the authors to analyze the global actions of the U.S., including the establishment of [737 U.S. military bases](#) in nations around the world, in relation to the nefarious history of colonial interventions. Boy was I wrong. According to Cohen, Küpçü, and Khanna, the “new colonialists” are [Oxfam](#), [Mercy Corps](#), [Doctors Without Borders](#), and the [Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation](#)!

Cohen, Küpçü, and Khanna claim that these NGOs and development groups “direct development strategies and craft government policies” in dozens of states with corrupt or feeble governments. These international actors have now “taken over key state functions, providing for the health, welfare, and safety of citizens.” The authors claim that this “largesse often erodes governments’ ability to stand up on their own” and results in “a vicious cycle of dependency.” As a consequence, the “failed” and “failing” states are unable to develop the skills necessary to run their countries effectively and are dependent on the NGOs for survival. “These private actors have become the ‘new colonialists’ of the 21st century.”

This analysis of “the new colonialists” brings two disheartening developments into the open. The first is the way in which the language of colonialism, imperialism and empire has been sanitized and misused in the current period. Some scholars, for example, push hard for a new U.S.-led imperialist empire to globalize Western approaches to democracy and freedom. Others look fondly back at the era of British colonialism with rose-colored glasses. Unfortunately, Cohen, Küpçü, and Khanna fall into this revisionist quagmire by conflating colonialism solely with dependency, ignoring the most vicious and brutal components to the over 450 years of colonial domination. It should not be so easy to label an organization “colonialist.” In fact, given the real meaning of the term, it is absurd and scandalous to call the Gates Foundation “colonialist.” One

would not lightly brand a group “fascist” or “totalitarian.” Yet, somehow today it is OK to talk about empire, imperialism and colonialism as if these were almost neutral terms.

Second, broadside attacks from the left and the right of the political spectrum on NGOs have escalated in the recent period. In addition, terrorists have declared war on NGOs, aid groups, and the United Nations. Within the academy, a “cottage industry” of scholars writing books and articles centered on the illegitimate power of humanitarian NGOs, faith-based organizations, and mega-philanthropies has emerged in the last decade. Many of these analysts have usefully documented cases of unaccountability, waste, and cronyism within the NGO community. Others have shown that, some so-called NGOs are actually profit-driven organizations with private agendas that are of little help to a poor country. However, such critiques do not apply to most of the major NGOs and philanthropies, including Doctors Without Borders and the Gates Foundation. These organizations have done reliable work in alleviating human suffering. Cohen, Küpçü, and Khanna acknowledge that these organizations “unquestionably fill vital roles, providing lifesaving healthcare, educating children, and distributing food.” Yet, despite this overall record of achievement, the authors believe that the consequence of effective NGO work is to relieve the government of the failing state of the responsibility to protect and provide for their people. These declining states are unable “to develop the skills necessary to run their countries effectively.” The authors wonder if the “new colonialists” have gone “too far in attempting to manage responsibilities that should be those of governments alone” These NGOs are thus faced with an impossible Catch-22: If they don’t act, literally thousands of lives could be lost; Yet if they do act to save these lives with interventions, for example, of food and medicine, the authors argue these actions will contribute to the poor nation’s long-term dependency on outside aid.

Cohen, Küpçü, and Khanna doubt that these humanitarian organizations really hope for a day that their services are not needed. The authors argue that the survival of these organizations depends upon the continued existence of weak states. Perhaps there are some individuals working in these NGOs who think and act the way the authors describe. I’ve never met such individuals. I have, on the other hand, met and interviewed many people in the NGO world, including staff with Doctors Without Borders, who very much yearn for a world that privileges the rights of the poor. These individuals would absolutely prefer to be working in the safety of their home nations. Yet, to advance global social justice, these global pilgrims set aside those personal goals. The amount of human suffering that would occur if these individuals and organizations packed up shop, out of a fear of creating dependency, is immeasurable.

For a people to be able to assert their collective and individual rights, and to hold their governments accountable, they first must be able to eat and to be free from devastating disease. There are countless examples of NGOs giving individuals the opportunity to focus beyond survival needs. A final example will perhaps make this point clear. [Nicholas Kristof](#) describes the work of a clinic in Ethiopia funded by outside individual donors and humanitarian aid groups. The clinic repairs obstetric fistulas, one of the most awful injuries humans can sustain. A fistula occurs when a physically immature teenage girl tries to give birth and the baby gets stuck. Without a doctor to help, the baby is stillborn, and the girl is left with perforations between her vagina and bladder or rectum. At a very early age, these girls’ lives are ruined. Globally, approximately two million girls and women suffer from this affliction. At the cost of about \$450

per operation, supplied by individuals and humanitarian NGOs, these teenage girls are brought back to life. Of course, the Ethiopian government has responsibility for the welfare of its citizens and should be providing a system of basic health care. But, until that day comes, it is truly glorious to see these individuals and humanitarian NGOs working to save these young girls' lives. These actions to save lives do not create dependency. On the contrary, these actions give these girls the freedom to actualize their human capabilities, perhaps for the first time. These outside medical interventions create the conditions for these girls to act against state corruption and inefficiency, and hopefully someday put an end to destructive forms of dependency.

William F. Felice is professor of political science and head of the international relations major at Eckerd College. Dr. Felice was named the 2006 Florida Professor of the Year by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching. He is the author of The Global New Deal: Economic and Social Human Rights in World Politics (2003), Taking Suffering Seriously: The Importance of Collective Human Rights (1996), and numerous articles on the theory and practice of human rights. More information can be found on his department website <http://www.eckerd.edu/academics/irga/faculty/felice.php>.