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REVIEW ARTICLE

AID AS AUTOBIOGRAPHY

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JERKER CARLSSON, GLORIA SMOLOKAE and NICHOLAS VAN DE WALLE, *Foreign Aid in Africa: learning from country experiences*. Uppsala: Nordiska Afrikainstitutet, 1997, 224 pp., £24.99, ISBN 91 7106 414 1 (paperback).

CAROL LANCASTER, *Aid to Africa: so much to do, so little done*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999, 303 pp., £17.50, ISBN 0 226 46838 0 (paperback).

JAMES MORTON, *The Poverty of Nations: the aid dilemma at the heart of Africa*. London: Tauris, 1996, 265 pp., £14.95, ISBN 1 86064 034 6 (paperback).

EBERHARD REUSSE, *Interventionist Paradigms and the Ills of Aid: an interaction model of pathological processes in the generation and implementation of development policies*. Munich: Olzog, 1999, 124 pp., DM 54, ISBN 3 7892 9708 9 (paperback).

OLIVER SAASA and JERKER CARLSSON, *The Aid Relationship in Zambia: a conflict scenario*. Uppsala: Nordiska Afrikainstitutet, 1996, 170 pp., £13.95, ISBN 91 7106 399 4 (paperback).

ALEX DE WAAL, *Famine Crimes: politics and the disaster relief industry in Africa*. Oxford: Currey for the International African Institute, 1997, 238 pp., £40.00, ISBN 0 85255 811 2 (hard covers), £11.95, ISBN 0 85255 810 4 (paperback).

These books agree on four points: first, that much of aid to Africa does not achieve its stated objects, especially in the medium term; second, that the overall contribution of aid to African economic development is uncertain; third, that the practices associated with aid, and the large number of aid agencies at work in the region, can have serious negative consequences on the societies, economies and politics of African countries; fourth, that much of the blame for this situation can be laid at the feet of the donor agencies. In saying this these books are not saying anything that many people familiar with the practice of aid in African do not already know (the authors of all the books reviewed here have extensive practical experience of aid in Africa) and, indeed, that has not

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been said by some of the major aid donors, particularly the World Bank. This generates a very peculiar situation indeed. Many people involved in the aid business in Africa know it is failing, yet it has been growing in size and scope. This, of course, raises the obvious question about what drives it on in the face of this self-acknowledged failure, and, much more controversially, it raises the question of what should be done in this situation.

AID TO AFRICA

Aid to Africa is a big business. Net official development assistance (ODA) to sub-Saharan Africa totalled about US$17 billion in 1996.[1] This figure is roughly three times that of the total foreign direct investment in the subcontinent, and still makes up something like 5 per cent of the official GNP of the region.[2] The relatively large amount of aid flowing to Africa distinguishes it from any other developing region. For example, ODA as a percentage of GNP is five times higher in Africa than in any other region. These aggregate figures obscure the extent to which aid plays a major role in the economies of individual countries. Lancaster says that in 1992–93 aid flows equalled 50 per cent or more of total investment spending in twenty-nine African countries, and for another thirteen countries aid was equivalent to more than 100 per cent of investment spending (p. 41). Aid flows to the region have also been rising fairly steadily since the 1970s. In constant 1995 US dollars the amount of ODA per year flowing to Africa has tripled since 1970 (Lancaster, p. 39).

There are also a very large number of development agencies at work in Africa. Lancaster has estimated that there are about forty major bilateral and multilateral aid agencies active in the region (five of which disbursed over US$1 billion in 1996). In addition there are many, many smaller governmental and non-governmental organisations providing aid (p. 38). For example, Carlsson *et al.* report that there are something like 180 at work in Burkina Faso (p. 44). De Waal says that during the refugee crisis in Rwanda there were over 100 NGOs operating in Goma alone (p. 199). Simply stating the number of organisations at work does not reveal the full extent of what Morton calls the ‘aid machine’ (p. 56). Many of the various aid agencies are linked together through formal and informal arrangements. NGOs, for example, are often used as implementing agencies by larger aid organisations. The various organisations at work in any one country often engage in (more or less successful) co-ordination of their development activities. There is a

[1] Official development assistance is defined as a transfer of concessional resources from one government to another, or from a government to an international aid agency or non-governmental organisation, with the ostensible goal of promoting development in a less developed country.

[2] In 1997 foreign direct investment was about US$5·2 billion (World Bank, 2000: 271).

pattern of rotation of staff from one agency to another (de Waal, p. 65). Many of the aid organisations have relationships of various kinds with academics, researchers, 'development consultants' and government officials. It is this that leads Morton to call the 'aid machine' a 'bureaucratic-academic complex' (p. 56). In the narrower field of humanitarian relief de Waal has identified a similar situation. What he calls the 'humanitarian international' is a 'transnational elite of relief workers, aid-dispensing civil servants, academic and journalists, and others, and the institutions they work for' (p. xv). De Waal also argues that alongside the growth of the aid business an increasingly 'common culture' has emerged among the aid donors (p. 65). This is particularly evident in the common language that characterises the policies and pronouncements of aid agencies. In almost every policy paper related to aid will be found the same terms and the same arguments. One begins to suspect that terms like 'civil society', 'grass-roots organisations', 'participation' and 'ownership' are invoked less as meaningful and operationalised development concepts than as a sign of one's membership of the 'development club'.

ASSESSING AID

The question that obviously arises from all this activity is, does aid in fact work? The difficulty is simply that it is very difficult to know (Cassen *et al.*, 1986). Part of the problem is the paucity of data, a particularly acute problem in many African countries (Mosley, 1992). It is important to note that this problem is not just one of African governments' ability or otherwise to collect accurate macroeconomic statistics, it is also a problem generated by the unwillingness of many development agencies to carry out evaluations of their own projects and programmes. Lancaster estimates that only about 15–20 per cent of all aid projects in Africa are ever evaluated for impact (p. 72).[3] Most agencies do undertake some kind of audit of aid projects and programmes to ensure that funds have been spent as intended, and many agencies make some attempt to assess whether the goals of the project have been attained, in the short term at least. What is missing, as Lancaster points out, is evaluations of aid projects and programmes that look at the broader and longer-term impacts (p. 73). Even when these exist they are often difficult to compare, as aid agencies employ different and distinctive evaluation methodologies (OECD, 1999).

As if these problems were not daunting enough, there are a set of more profound analytical problems associated with assessing the impact of aid. Lancaster highlights three. First, there is the vexed issue of what 'effectiveness' may actually be. Should it be understood in

[3] It is based on Roger Riddell's estimate that only around 10 per cent of all aid since the late 1960s has been evaluated (1987: 185). Lancaster's figure is higher because of the increased emphasis in recent years on evaluation.

narrow terms as an assessment of whether a project or programme achieved its stated objectives in the short term? Or should it be understood in terms of longer-term sustainable impact? Or, finally, should it be understood in terms of its impact on broader development objectives (economic growth, poverty reduction). Second, there is the obvious but deeply problematic issue of counterfactuals. The difficulty is of 'controlling' for the numerous factors that can influence development outcomes so as to assess the specific 'impact' of the particular project or programme. Third, and related to this, is the issue of 'fungibility'. The difficulty here is assessing the 'opportunity cost' of aid resources. This cuts both ways: in the absence of a particular aid project or programme what resources would have been spent, on what, and with what effects, by the government and other development agencies? In the presence of a particular aid project or programme, what resources are freed up to be spent by the government, on what, and again with what effects?

The problems associated with the availability of data, clarity of definitions, and counterfactuals, are the same kinds of problems as are faced more generally by academics and policy makers in their attempts to understand the social world. One route out of these problems has been to engage in large-scale statistical studies using regression analysis to 'control' for other variables (Cassen, 1986: 35–41). This has been much favoured by the World Bank, for example (World Bank, 1998). Despite the seemingly 'objective' quality of the conclusions drawn from large statistical studies of the impact of aid, they are as open to criticism as any other kind of statistical studies of social phenomena. In particular there are problems with the quality of the data available, the extent to which the data are comparable (given the different definitions and measures used by different countries), as well as the more technical problems associated with trying to capture complex interrelations using statistical techniques. In addition, as has been pointed out with regard to the World Bank's studies, these large-scale projects tend to overlook the microeconomic impacts of aid projects and programmes, concentrating instead on the impact of aid on poverty rates and economic growth, and provide little fine-grained analysis of the impact of particular projects and programmes in particular countries. One final point to note about these statistical studies is that they tend to end up simply affirming whatever happen to be the policy priorities of the institution producing them. So the World Bank's studies of aid effectiveness 'show' that 'sound policies', 'good governance' and 'country ownership' are the crucial factors determining the effectiveness of aid (World Bank, 1995). Either these policy priorities really are right, or something else is going on here. One possibility is that these studies are not in fact simply 'about' the impact of aid, but are, rather, at least in part, 'autobiographical' of the institution undertaking them. This is a possibility returned to below.

The other route usually taken out of the analytical difficulties associated with assessing aid effectiveness is to engage in 'case studies'. In fact, however, much of the literature on the impact of aid is characterised by the use of anecdotes.[4] These are not necessarily unilluminating, but they rarely provide enough support for the conclusions that aid agencies wish to draw from them. Of the books reviewed here only two can be really considered case studies. They are the books by Morton, on the impact of aid in the Dafur region of Somalia, and by Saasa and Carlsson, on the relationship between aid donors and the Zambian government. Three of the books, those by Reusse, Lancaster and Carlsson *et al.*, are really a series of vignettes strung together with general arguments. The theoretical and methodological difficulties associated with knowing the social world through case studies, and the anthropological skills needed to undertake them, are rarely broached in these studies and in studies of aid more generally. One response is simply to say these books are bad social science—which they, and most studies of aid, undoubtedly are—and that we should treat the conclusions drawn from them very tentatively. But again there is another possibility. It may be that the significance of the 'cases' has less to do with providing substantiated evidence for particular policies than with trying to sell those policies.

The final point to note about the difficulty of assessing the impact of aid is that it seems to make no difference at all to the confidence with which aid agencies continue their work. This suggests that the work of aid agencies is not in fact dependent on the truth or falsity of the claims they make about the desirability of particular policies or aid projects. But if the work of aid agencies is not grounded in any very well established claims about the effectiveness of their work, it must spring from somewhere else.

THE INEFFECTIVENESS OF AID IN AFRICA

Despite the apparent difficulty of assessing the effectiveness of aid, all these books in their own way do attempt to draw some conclusions. The most striking are, first, that the overall contribution of aid to development in Africa is unclear and, second, that many (perhaps most) aid projects and programmes in Africa are unsuccessful on their own terms.

As regards the overall impact of aid on levels of economic growth, Carol Lancaster puts it starkly: 'most of the econometric studies of the relationship of aid to growth have found that aid has had no significant impact, either positive or negative, on economic performance' (p. 49). An older study came to much the same conclusion: 'inter-country statistical analyses do not show anything conclusive—positive or negative—about the impact of aid on growth' (Cassen *et al.*, 1986: 33). A World Bank study found that aid can have a positive impact on

[4] In this regard notice the 'boxes' that focus on particular (usually successful) 'cases' that are so prominent in almost all the policy literature produced by development agencies.

economic growth when 'good' fiscal, trade and monetary policies are in place (World Bank, 1998). Similarly, Cassen *et al.* argued that 'if appropriate aid is put to good use in a satisfactory policy context, and if all the other components of growth are present, the statistical relationship between aid and growth will be positive' (1986: 33). But, as Lancaster points out, for many African countries these conditions are not in place. In addition, World Bank research has shown that aid flows have little impact on domestic policy change (Devarajan *et al.*, 1999). Taking Zambia as a case study, Saasa and Carlsson argue that 'it has been more and more difficult to see any positive connection between aid and economic development' (p. 8). This conclusion is repeated by Carlsson *et al.* (p. 7). Morton agrees: 'for all the money spent . . . many Third World countries . . . continue to make little or no progress' (p. 3).

Saasa and Carlsson identify an important paradox. Even when individual projects are successful on their own terms 'it is difficult to see these positive results reflected at the macro level' (p. 9). The implication is that aid is not 'additive', as is so often thought. A rash of 'successful' projects and programmes does not translate into overall development impact. The significance of this is that it is so often assumed that development is an 'additive' process. The most extreme recent example is the World Bank's 'Comprehensive Development Framework'. According to this, among the elements needed in developing countries are: an honest, competent government, committed to the fight against corruption; strong property and personal laws; an efficient and honest legal system; a well supervised financial system; a strong social safety net; effective education and health services; improved infrastructure; environmental protection; rural development; urban development; and an 'enabling environment' for the private sector (World Bank, 2000: 21). This is the development equivalent of the witches' brew. One might be more charitably inclined to this kind of thing if the individual projects and programmes that make it up were in fact successful. But in Africa they often are not.

During the 1990s less than 50 per cent of all World Bank-financed projects in Africa were rated as 'satisfactory' in terms of development outcomes, and in 1995 less than a quarter of World Bank projects in Africa were judged likely to be sustainable (World Bank, 1994). Lancaster argues that USAID projects in Africa have been less effective than projects in other parts of the world, and that even many relatively effective projects are not sustainable in the long run (p. 95). Similarly she says that French aid has 'frequently been ineffective' (p. 121), that a third or more of British aid projects performed unsatisfactorily (p. 137), and that only 40 per cent of European Development Fund-financed projects were judged effective in terms of intended impact and sustainability (p. 221). There is no reason to think that other major donors have performed any better. It may be the case that NGOs perform better, and they would certainly claim to be performing better. As de Waal points out, however, there is little strong evidence of it (p.

142), partly because NGOs tend to be reluctant to make public the results of their evaluation studies.

THE NEGATIVE IMPACT OF AID

Lancaster says that 'an assumption in most discussions of foreign aid is that if it is large enough and effective in achieving its specific objectives it will spur development . . . without significant negative effects' (p. 44). She might have gone on to add that another assumption is that even when it does not achieve its specific objectives its impact is in some way 'neutral', as if a target had simply been 'missed'. As all these books attest, this is simply not the case. Even when 'successful' on their own terms, aid projects and programmes can have significant side effects, some of which run directly counter to the stated objectives of development organisations.

In recent years the issue of aid dependence has received more attention (Lister and Stevens, 1992; Azam *et al.*, 1999). There has been a rapid rise in aid dependence in Africa. In 1997, for example, there were nineteen countries in the region for whom ODA made up more than 10 per cent of GNP (World Bank, 2000: 270–1). As Lancaster points out, aid dependence is not in itself necessarily a problem. It has the potential to create a big problem if the aid flows dry up and the government is left with a very large hole in its finances. More significant is the political impact of aid dependence. A World Bank paper has argued that aid dependence can undermine 'good governance' 'by weakening political accountability, encouraging rent seeking and corruption, fomenting conflict over control of aid resources, and alleviating pressures to reform inefficient policies and institutions' (Knack, 2000).

Morton argues exactly this in the case of Sudan. He says that the Sudanese state has never had to develop effective links between ruler and ruled because it has always been financed externally, most recently by large inflows of foreign aid. According to Morton the most significant result is that the state has never had to develop effective tax-raising powers (p. 48). For Morton taxation is 'the missing weapon of accountability' (p. 48). Because government funds are not provided by the state, he says, people's reaction to corruption is considerably muted (p. 49). On top of that the existence of external funds means that the Sudanese state actually needs less power in the sense that it no longer needs the ability to contact each member of society. Finally, he says, foreign aid flows account for the fact that Sudanese rulers have been relatively unconcerned about the country's economic condition. Their position in power is dependent on continued aid flows, not on providing the conditions for economic development. There is a strong possibility that the impact of aid runs directly counter to the current concern to promote accountability, democracy and 'good governance'.

De Waal follows a similar line of argument with regard to the much more emotive issue of famine relief and prevention. His basic position is that famine is conquerable but that conquering it is a political issue.

What is necessary, he argues, is the development of an 'anti-famine political contract'. It would include a political commitment on the part of governments to famine prevention, the recognition of famine as a political scandal by the people, and lines of accountability from government to people that would enable this commitment to be enforced. In various ways this kind of 'contract' developed in South Asia, with the result that famine has been unknown in the last twenty-five years. De Waal argues that in Africa a number of factors have conspired to reduce the possibility of such a contract emerging. First, there has been only very limited commitment to political openness on the part of African leaders. Second, the emergence of neo-liberalism and structural adjustment (along with the dramatic economic collapse) reorientated governmental accountability towards external agents. Third—and this is the heart of his critique—the operation of the 'humanitarian international' actually worked to undercut local forms of political accountability. For example, he argues that in the Ethiopian famine of 1984–85 the government delegated all responsibility for relief efforts to international agencies, which had the effect of depoliticising the famine and assisting the government's ability to stay in power (p. 127). He concludes that 'external involvement, however well intentioned, almost inevitably damages the search for local political solutions' (p. xvi).

Aid flows and aid organisations can also have an impact on existing social structures. In the most recent development paradigm it is 'Southern NGOs' 'indigenous' and 'civil society' groups that are supposed to provide a channel for holding the state accountable for its actions (in the name of 'good governance'). It is this view that justifies the funding of such groups as an exercise in 'institution building'. Despite the place this argument has in contemporary development discourse very little research has been done into whether this view of the role of these organisations is correct. But, as Reusse argues, there is enough evidence to suggest that the proliferation of such groups can have negative political consequences. In some instances they in fact empower and enrich an already privileged metropolitan middle class 'not infrequently motivated towards personal enrichment and clientelism' and the organisations supported develop a '*rentier* mentality' more concerned with sustaining the flow of aid funds than with 'representing' the interests of society (p. 86). As de Waal puts it, 'aid empowers the powerful, and also creates new political or economic groupings around it' (p. 137). This is something that has been known for years, of course, but aid agencies are in general reluctant to draw attention to it.

Beyond the ways in which aid can impact on large-scale social processes in African countries there are a myriad other potential side effects of aid. Large aid flows and large numbers of aid donors can lead to a situation where a disproportionate amount of bureaucrats' time is spent dealing with outside agents (Morton, p. 49). This is one of the major themes of both the Saasa and Carlsson and the Carlsson *et al.* books. It can also lead to a leaching away of capable civil servants from government Ministries, as donors tend to pay better—thus further weakening usually already fragile civil services (Hanlon, 1991). Aid can also allow governments to continue financing expenditures that are inimical to development, and, finally, large flows of aid can lead to inflation and a real appreciation in exchange rates (the so-called 'Dutch disease') (Lancaster, p. 62; Carlsson *et al.*, p. 84).

All these side effects can also operate at the more 'micro' level. Individual development projects can skew the spending patterns and political accountability of local governments, just as they can shift or reinforce existing local social, political and economic structures. Reusse argues that in many countries the myriad aid organisations at work 'have created a market for mostly young, underemployed local people able to communicate with foreigners' and that these people eventually assume 'a "spokesman" role' for the community which may be very different from their previous social position (p. 90). This points to the obvious, but often overlooked, fact that every aid project or programme in some way or another impacts upon its environment. That is, after all, what is supposed to happen. But even when the impact is not what was intended—as is often the case—there is nonetheless an impact, and this may run directly counter to what aid agencies are trying to achieve.

All this—the inability to establish any link between aid and economic development, the failure of many aid projects and programmes in Africa, and the potentially significant side effects of aid—is well known in the 'aid machine'. The figures are not secret or hard to obtain, and none of the arguments is complex or obscure. But that makes the whole thing even more baffling. Aid to Africa has been increasing for thirty years, yet perhaps half of it does not work and even when it does work its contribution to overall economic development is unclear. Billions of dollars are spent and hundreds of thousands of people are involved, yet still it leads to outcomes directly contrary to those publicly endorsed by the development community. And many people who engage in the activity know all this to be true. The question is why it continues in the face of self-acknowledged failure.

AID AS AUTOBIOGRAPHY

A common criticism of aid in Africa, both in these books and elsewhere, is that it has often been 'donor-driven'. The recognition of this problem has generated growing concern with 'participation' and 'ownership', which have now become an obligatory part of the lexicon. But there is more to be said about 'donor-driven' aid than forming part of the current 'auto-critique' of aid agencies. Indeed, as some of these books suggest, the thought that aid is donor-driven is the key to understanding it: aid is not just driven by the donors, it is in important respects an autobiography of those agencies and the societies from which they sprang. Aid to Africa is about 'us', not 'them'. One obvious reason is that the intended 'beneficiaries' of aid tend to have very little say over the policies and practices of the aid donors. As de Waal says, 'those who suffer famine have very little leverage over foreign relief organisations, so that the impulse for action necessarily arises elsewhere. The charitable market is driven by demand for a humanitarian "product"' (p. 82). Lancaster makes the same point: 'the intended beneficiaries of aid agencies—the poor in other countries—have very little say over how aid agencies are organized and run because those agencies are not accountable to those beneficiaries' (p. 226).

The idea that it is autobiographical can be explored in five areas: first, in terms of the bureaucratic and institutional imperatives facing aid agencies; second, in terms of the internal procedures and processes of the agencies; third, in terms of the stated policies of the agencies; fourth, in terms of the practices of aid agencies, and the particular attitudes that underlie them; and, finally, in terms of the broader impulse behind aid and humanitarian activity.

All aid agencies face certain bureaucratic and institutional imperatives. De Waal calls these the 'hard humanitarian interests' (as opposed to the soft humanitarian interests that are the agencies' stated aims) (p. 66). The books reviewed here identify at least three of these interests. First, there is the necessity to obtain money. Fund raising is obviously a central concern of NGOs. One important feature of this in recent years has been the increasing amounts of money NGOs are accepting from governments. According to de Waal, three-quarters of British food aid is now handled by NGOs, and it is common for major international NGOs (CARE, Catholic Relief Services, World Vision) to undertake relief programmes that are largely or wholly funded by governments (p. 141). As de Waal notes, this means that, for many of these organisations, the name they prefer for themselves ('non-governmental') is meaningless (p. 72). Second, there is the pressure to spend money. Lancaster identifies this as a particular problem for the major bilateral and multilateral agencies. She says that 'advancement within USAID has often turned on the abilities of managers to spend available monies' (p. 109), and she says much the same about the World Bank and the British aid programme. The result has been that there has been less focus on the effectiveness of money spent. Similarly, de Waal argues that 'humanitarian crises' lead to a scramble to 'be present' and have relief programmes regardless of the quality and the overall impact on 'beneficiaries'. Third, there is the desire to avoid or be insulated from criticism. De Waal argues that agencies are reluctant to criticise other agencies for fear that any criticism may impact upon the whole sector (p. 140).

These 'hard' interests are connected. Fund raising requires criticism to be kept quiet. Spending money provides the rationale for raising more money to spend. This is not to impugn the motives of the staff of aid and humanitarian agencies, and none of the books reviewed here does so. But it points to the way in which aid can be driven by concerns internal to the agencies and the sector they work in.

The sense that in fact much aid can be understood as a kind of autobiography extends to the internal processes used by the aid agencies. As Lancaster says, bilateral aid agencies have 'tended to adopt programming systems similar to those that are used in other government agencies or preferred by legislators' (p. 227). One of the most obvious examples is the rise of an 'evaluation' and 'audit' culture within aid agencies. It does not seem controversial to suggest that this is the result of a more general rise in 'auditing' and 'evaluation' within public-sector bodies in Western countries, itself part of a wider set of practices associated with more effective monitoring and control of state agencies (OECD, 1999: 97). It is open to doubt whether assessment has improved the effectiveness of aid, precisely because the audience for 'evaluations' and 'audits' tends to be other government agencies.

The changing policy priorities of many aid agencies are not simply, or even largely, the result of a process of learning about the best ways to ensure developmental impact. They often reflect changing political concerns among Western states and societies. As Reusse says, the presentation of 'development problems' is in fact driven by the political 'climate' of the Western public and its governments: 'the heavy emphasis on women's liberation and the "alleviation of poverty" are the product of a (hitherto) highly patriarchal and achievement-oriented cultural history. These concerns are not given equal importance by Third World societies, inspite [*sic*] of lip-service statements at international conferences' (pp. 83–4). Lancaster says of the Swedish aid programme that it has been shaped by 'the values of Swedish society . . . [and] the projection abroad of the "Swedish model" ' (p. 159). This is not to criticise the 'Swedish model', only to show that Sweden's aid policies have been shaped by its vision of itself. De Waal points to the rising prominence of NGOs generally within the development and humanitarian relief sector. This he links with the increasing significance of broadly neo-liberal economic ideas in Western states, not with any 'objective' assessment of the development benefits of NGOs (p. 66). Morton makes a convincing case that the acceptance of the 'tragedy of the commons' argument by aid agencies working in Darfur had little to do with any assessment of the actual situation. Instead, he argues, 'it matched the concerns of the Western world' and fitted with the rational actor model that dominated academic discussion of grazing, cultivation and conservation (pp. 194–7). Development policies are more about the agencies that develop them than they are about the 'needs' of the 'beneficiaries'.

All the books reviewed here show that aid activity is often shaped by a set of attitudes towards African people and societies. Lancaster sums it up nicely by quoting a French aid official: 'In Africa we asked the questions, and we gave the answers' (p. 122). De Waal says that many of those working in the 'humanitarian international' 'do not consider the views and experiences of ordinary famine-vulnerable people'. One of his explanations is that famine relief has come to be seen as largely a technical matter, and of course local people are not thought to possess the relevant technical knowledge, despite the obvious fact that they are likely to know more about their environment and experiences than any outside agency (p. 24). Morton makes a similar set of arguments. He says that aid agencies see Darfur and its people as 'stuck in a primitive social and technical framework, out of which they cannot break of their own accord'. Morton argues that this is not the case, but that this vision has shaped the policies of aid agencies working in the region, particularly their obsession with technical and 'scientific' solutions (p. 61). Reusse talks of the construction of 'a powerless peasantry' and the 'infantilisation of local populations' (pp. 79, 96). The attitude of superiority that seems to characterise development agencies is not just limited to the poor. Governments and government officials are also subjected to it. Carlsson *et al.* show that civil servants and even whole Ministries are often simply bypassed by donors who want to deal personally with a few high-profile Ministers. 'High-handed' seems like a rather gentle term to describe this (p. 34). NGOs seem little better. In discussing Burkina Faso the authors say that 'most NGOs do not feel obliged to explain their actions' to the relevant government agency (p. 44).

Explaining this attitude is not straightforward. Reusse argues that it is related to the need on the part of development agencies to construct an African reality that justifies development interventions (p. 6). If African farmers and bureaucrats are 'backward' or 'incompetent' they clearly need outside help. This attitude also has a long history that stretches back to the colonial era, suggesting that there is more to it than simply the need to justify development interventions (Cooper, 1997). There are intimations in it of a general attitude of cultural and intellectual superiority. Despite all the recent talk of 'participation' it may be the case that most development professionals really do think they know best. And perhaps underlying this is a deeper belief that the cognitive resources of the enlightened development professional really are far superior to those of the African poor.

Finally there is the issue of where the impulse to engage in development and humanitarian action comes from at all. De Waal poses the question 'Is Oxfam primarily a service to the Victorian charity ethic in Britain?' (p. 138). Morton thinks the answer is yes: 'aid is now, quite clearly, a First World consumption good' (p. 57). It is, he says, 'driven by First World concerns, lightly modified by what the Third World recipients will accept' (p. 247). Similarly, Reusse says that the 'aid flow in the past has been supply-driven' (p. 19). What this suggests is that foreign aid is at least in part an expression of the particular moral outlook of (parts of) Western societies (Lumsdaine, 1993). 'Our' concern for the poor in Africa is precisely that: *ours* (Sznaider, 2001). Identifying the socially and historically contingent character of the humanitarian impulse is not thereby to criticise it. It is, however, to suggest that at base it is a reflection of our history; it is autobiographical of us, and it may be that this is the ultimate reason why it so often fails. Despite all the talk of 'development impact' it may be that this takes second place to the seeming need on the part of development and humanitarian agencies to express the humanitarian impulse.

CONCLUSION: THE END OF AID?

De Waal's conclusions are stark: 'international humanitarianism is an obstacle rather than an aid to conquering famine' and 'most current humanitarian activity in Africa is useless or damaging and should be abandoned' (pp. xv–xvi). Morton too thinks that 'a cessation of aid should not be dismissed out of hand' (p. 247). For Lancaster the purpose of her book is not to 'attack aid but to improve it', and the lesson she wishes to draw is 'not that aid should end but that we should examine it dispassionately in order to better its effectiveness' (p. 13). The conclusion of her book, however, is bleak: 'unless it carefully avoids reinforcing flawed policies and poor governance, weakening African institutions and creating dependence, more aid can buy less development' (p. 221). Such conclusions are likely to be shocking (and are intended to be so) for members of the 'humanitarian international' and the 'aid machine'. But it is worth asking whether they really should be. What kinds of justifications for continued aid flows to Africa can be given when its failings are so apparent?

It is clear that the justification of much aid to Africa is precisely that it does have some positive developmental or humanitarian impact. But there are reasons to doubt whether such is in fact the case, even in the short run, let alone over the medium and longer term. Even where 'successes' have been identified the very great difficulty of assessing aid 'effectiveness' brings into doubt the extent to which they are in fact unambiguous successes. The problem surely is that, while the public justifications for aid are consequentialist, the reasons for its perpetuation are not. As has been argued here, aid to Africa is in large part a reflection of the institutional interests, the passing policy fads and the particular normative outlook of sections of Western society. For that reason it is unlikely that aid to Africa will ever cease. But it may be time to consider whether it is doing more harm than good.

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