

Book Review

Nikolas Barry-Shaw & Dru Oja Jay

Paved with Good Intentions: Canada's Development NGOs from Idealism to Imperialism

Halifax: Fernwood Publishing, 2012

Reviewed by Howard A. Doughty

I vividly recall attending a small Christian Sunday School in the very early 1950s. Each week I'd put a dime in one side and a quarter in the other side of a small envelope with two pockets—one for the maintenance of my rural Presbyterian Church and the other for "Foreign Missions." It never occurred to me that the smaller coin did anything but good for poor, diseased and starving people who lived and died in what French demographer Alfred Sauvy called the "le tiers monde" and was soon to become widely known in English as "the Third World." My inchoate intentions and token contributions were primly clothed in moral rectitude.

In addition to a naïve yet also patrician attitude toward foreign aid and its recipients, Canadians of a certain age may be forgiven for once having a smug conceit and a smothering complacency with regard to Canadian military and diplomatic affairs. Punching slightly above our weight in World War II and in the United Nations' action in Korea, there was no doubt in our minds that our soldiers were manifestly virtuous and stood squarely on the side of freedom as principle democracy as process in dramatic showdowns with various forms of totalitarianism.

Throughout the 1950s and beyond, Canadian forces were called upon to keep the peace in unsettled places such as Cyprus, Kashmir, Lebanon, Palestine and, tragically, Rwanda. In fact, the entire peacekeeping project and the role of the "blue helmets" came about in large part because of the efforts of Canadian diplomat and future prime minister, Lester B. Pearson. His 1957 Nobel Peace Prize in recognition of his negotiating skills during the Suez crisis was appropriately followed in 1988 by the awarding of the prize collectively to the UN peacekeepers.

Although Canada was unambiguously allied with the United States through the defence alliances of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization and the North American Aerospace Defense Command, it maintained a reputation as a trustworthy and marginally independent voice in world affairs. Although serving as an American proxy in, for instance, the International Control Commission, established in 1954 and not dissolved until 1973, which was responsible for the policing of the Demilitarized Zone temporarily separating North and South Vietnam, Canadian political leaders including Prime Ministers John George Diefenbaker, Lester Bowles Pearson and Pierre Eliot Trudeau also distinguished themselves by keeping some distance between Canada and the protracted American hostilities in Vietnam, the 1965 invasion of the Dominican Republic and other adventures and misadventures undertaken by Canada's largest trading partner and the country with which it shares the most intimate cultural bonds. Although, for example, Canada did not exactly maintain a measured detachment from the brutal US-supported *coup d'état* in Chile, it was notable that Canada refrained from joining the Organization of American States until 1990, perhaps due to the fact that the OAS was perceived as very much an instrument of

American foreign policy and that involvement was potentially embarrassing association in view of Canada's refusal to cut diplomatic and trade ties with Cuba despite considerable US pressure to do so. In any case, in 1990 during Brian Mulroney's second term in Canada's highest office, that reluctance melted, though to his credit, Mulroney held firm to his opposition to *apartheid* in South Africa, risking the animosity of both American President Ronald W. Reagan and Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher of the United Kingdom. It's complicated.

Not to be forgotten are some relatively high profile exercises in development assistance to "underdeveloped" or, more optimistically, "developing" nations. Canada, for example, was an important participant in the Colombo Plan, an early multilateral aid program supplying assistance to countries in South and South-east Asia. And, of course, there was much positive talk about the newly crafted (British) Commonwealth, which afforded some evidence that the trappings of Empire could be sloughed off like the skin of a snake to reveal a healthy new example of cooperation in the place of a history of imperial exploitation.

In sum, Canadians viewed their country as humanitarian, democratic, peace-loving and peace-keeping. When possible, its influence was beneficial in support of a better quality of life for people who did not enjoy its advantages; when necessary, it firmly opposed despotism and international aggression. That, at least, was the conventional wisdom.

Oscar Lewis explained that poverty was the consequence of a culture of dependence, so reliance of outside assistance was also a developmental dead end.

In addition to formal actions by the Government of Canada, there were plenty of charities and problem-focused non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to help make improvements of every sort. Prominent among them were groups that advocated democracy and human rights, provided disaster relief, sponsored expansion of education and health care, and promoted economic development projects.

There were, of course, plenty of obstacles in the path of modernization. In particular, the lessons taught by Edward C. Banfield (1958) about the connection between a "backward" morality and economic stagnation in rural Italy were said to apply equally to most poor nations. They were said to be held back by obsolete beliefs about, for example, privileging kinship and tribal obligations over individual entrepreneurial initiative. Likewise, Oscar Lewis (1961) explained that poverty was the consequence of a culture of dependence; so, reliance on outside assistance—much like social assistance to the poor in advanced societies—was deemed a developmental dead-end. And, of course, it was generally assumed that political leaders in what would later be called "postcolonial" societies were almost assumed to be corrupt and eager to take advantage of external *largesse* for their personal gain. One way or another, the victims were said to be the authors of their own fate. Still, gallant modernizers could follow the advice of visionaries such as could be found at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in the person of former CIA operative and future National Security Advisor, Walt Whitman Rostow (1960). Then, with patient assistance and a firm hand to control excesses, the West could help to bring underdeveloped countries up to a comparatively decent standard and to encourage them to struggle diligently to realize their admittedly limited potentials.

In the alternative, it was firmly believed that failure to modernize along Western lines was to regress to the barbaric precolonial past. Moreover, apart from chronic obstacles to progress and the possibility of “backsliding,” there were also steep precipices on the sides of the road to modernity that had to be avoided at any cost. On one side was the hazard of excessive nationalism and the accompanying temptation to believe that a developing country could succeed using its own resources if only they were not unfairly appropriated by former colonial powers and vast global corporations. On the other was the seductress of socialism—whether based on the Soviet or the Chinese model, the differences between the two being obscure or even illusory to most Western authorities. Nationalism and socialism were the dual enemies of progress, at least in the opinion of the former colonizers and the American associates.

Whether encouraged by unwarranted pride or by ideological manipulation, it was deemed folly to indulge in inappropriate experiments in economic planning, land reform and the nationalization of foreign corporate assets—especially in rich agricultural and mining industries. Even a disproportionate enthusiasm for democracy, though no doubt a laudable long-term goal, was considered perilous; after all, it seemed obvious that people with no traditions of democracy and experience in representative government, could hardly be expected to vote rationally and were easy prey for demagogues and foreign agitators. Instead, reliance would be placed on suitable leaders that would be vetted, if not chosen and installed in office, by the West. Only with reliable and safe leaders could cooperation, harmony and mutual benefit be assured.

The dynamics of nation building and the socio-economic development of new states were hazardous and involved layers upon layers of perplexing predicaments. Precisely how the rich nations were to relate to the poor nations, how foreign aid was to be structured and controlled, what role the United Nations and multilateral agreements were to play and how the difficult route to progress was to be negotiated without making a disastrously wrong ideological or practical turn were knotty problems. Sometimes the solutions involved supporting cruel dictators who could promise stability despite their unsavoury use of the incarceration and torture of local dissidents. Sometimes the interests of non-state actors who were eager to take advantage of opportunities for agricultural, mineral and other resource development had to be taken into account. These non-state actors, of course, were mainly international corporations as diverse as the United Fruit Company in Central America and the international petroleum producers in the Near and Middle East. Their pitiless exploitation of postcolonial labour and natural riches was sometimes resented, but Western governments had little doubt that their investments in the Third World would ultimately increase over all prosperity and their initiatives were therefore to be encouraged. In the new nations, of course, it was sometimes difficult to tell whether the companies or the indigenous governments had the final say in development decisions; fortunately, unity in opposition to dreaded communism made for generally good relations among them all—Western governments, local authorities and international corporations alike.

As for the dissidents, the ideas and interests of anyone genuinely eager to bring a measure of equity to global economic and political relations were normally considered to be expressions of resistance to Western “values” and likely indicators that those who espoused them were dangerously close to supporting the wrong side in the capitalist-communist controversy. As a result, leaders who were merely nationalistically inclined or were cynically trying to play one superpower off against the other often found themselves overthrown or assassinated. The CIA and other Western agencies had a demonstrable intolerance of ambiguity. As a result, the Cold

War mentality led to an inventory of missteps and misdeeds that included but was not limited to hideous wars, systemic human rights abuses, ruthless exploitation of both human and natural resources, ecological degradation, punishing financial penalties and genocide—both physical and cultural.

Almost no one was exempt from culpability. Imperial nations, multinational enterprises, local strong men, military and intelligence services, arms dealers and drug cartels shared responsibility. They were ably assisted by the Western mass media which generally refused to deal sensibly with international issues and, of course, by an educational system that guarded against critical awareness of environmental, economic and ethical issues either by ignoring them or by masking them with banalities and superficialities in the classroom. In their book, *Paved with Good Intentions*, Nikolas Barry-Shaw and Dru Oja Jay seek to change this dynamic—at least a little.

Many books deal with vast, complex topics involving whole continents and with overarching ecological, economic, cultural and political themes. Painting the “big picture” is well and good, but the devilish details can be lost in the broad strokes of grand narrative. *Paved with Good Intentions* provides welcome relief from outsized arguments and capacious descriptions. It is about something relatively specific. It is mainly about one place and one time. And it is about one problem.

The problem it addresses is not the sort that frequently comes to mind when thinking about global inequity, imperial iniquity and the possibilities for almost apocalyptic crisis and collapse. In fact, it points a curled finger at unusual suspects. It shows that some of the putative heroes in the resistance to violence, disease, hunger and ignorance are, themselves, implicated in the problems they have been organized to solve. Hence, the phrasing of the title “paved with good intentions,” which commonly follows the words: “The road to Hell is”

On the first page of the Preface, the authors say: “This book was born in Haiti.” That benighted nation has been as good a substitute for Hell as is likely to be found in the Western Hemisphere. I’d add “... and back again”; for the road does indeed come back to the sources of most of that unfortunate country’s main troubles. It comes back to France, to some prominent European bankers, to the United States and, of course, makes a side-trip to Canada.

Most of us have been made more acutely aware of Haiti because of two recent events: the devastating earthquake of January, 2010 and the subsequent severe hurricane damage in October of that year. We are aware of fund-raising efforts and the frequent visits to the country by humanitarian Hollywood actor Sean Penn. We are probably aware that it is a home to the Voodoo religion. Fans of fiction and film may recall Graham Greene’s novel *The Comedians* or the Richard Burton-Elizabeth Taylor movie based on it. And that is probably where most of us stall.

We should, however, also be aware of Haiti’s past: its slave rebellion in the 1790s, in which Haitians who had learned of the French Revolution thought that the cry of *liberté, égalité, fraternité* was meant to include them too. Despite opposition from the newly formed United States of America under the leadership of George Washington, Haitian independence and the abolition of slavery were won by insurrectionists under the self-taught former slave Toussaint

Louverture. When Louverture agreed to peace and was transported to France for the final negotiations, he was seized, imprisoned and allowed to die in his cell within a few months.

It also wouldn't hurt to recall that Thomas Jefferson, the slave-owning author of the American *Declaration of Independence* ("we hold these truths to be self-evident that all men are created equal," etc.), assisted Emperor Napoleon in his failed military effort to crush the Haitian rebellion. Although he was a singular voice of liberty (albeit restricted mainly to members of his own race), Jefferson was quite sensibly terrified that a successful slave rebellion in Haiti might lead to a similar event in what Seymour Martin Lipset (1963) dubbed the first "new nation," the United States of America. The prospect of a bloody slaughter of American slave-owners was not one that Thomas Jefferson could tolerate.

We should know that, in 1825, France finally recognized Haiti's formal independence. The price was not paid in blood on the battlefield. Instead, Haiti was compelled to compensate the slave-owners or, rather, the foreign banks that funded the country's freedom in an amount so large that it would not be settled until 1947.

We should be aware that US marines occupied Haiti from 1915 to 1934.

We should remind ourselves that the democratically elected President of Haiti, Jean-Bertrand Aristide was removed from office *twice*. He was elected with 67% of the vote in 1990, and overthrown by the military with likely CIA collusion in 1991. He was elected again in 2001, this time with 92% of the vote. There is no question of foreign involvement in the *coup* that followed in 2004. American, French and Canadian officials and armed troops were clearly implicated as Aristide was forced to resign and was sent into exile (i.e., kidnapped) in the Central African Republic. He returned in 2011, over the strong objections of President Obama, and has so far bent to pressure not to return to political life.

So much for history!

Paved with Good Intentions focuses on Haiti and, to the surprise of many people who thought better of them, on a number of Canadian NGOs as well.

Much like military peacekeepers, NGOs that are engaged in foreign aid and assistance are deeply respected and appreciated. They are exemplars of "feel-good" politics and, in many cases, deservedly so. Staffed largely by volunteers or by paid administrators with skills that would easily fetch far higher salaries in the private sector or even in the public service, these mainly dedicated individuals embody "good intentions."

Unfortunately for Canada's self-image, the reality of Canadian involvement in Haiti does not live up to expectations. Nikolas Barry-Shaw is an "independent researcher," an activist, a member of the Canada-Haiti Action Network and an aspirant amateur basketball player. Dru Oja Jay is a writer, organizer, web developer and pastry aficionado. Neither one is apt to win any commendations from the current Government of Canada, nor any other Government of Canada in the near future. Together they have written a compelling account of the role of NGOs, their tangled relationship with the Canadian International Development Agency and the neoliberal political and economic agenda followed by the Western governments, global enterprises, international regulatory agencies and funding organizations. It was not always so.

Especially in the 1950s and 1960s, a radical critique of the major Western powers was articulated by diverse members of the academic community, largely among students who were inspired by the writings of Frantz Fanon (1961), various African nationalists, errant Maoists and the non-violent tacticians inspired by Mohandas Gandhi. One way or another, organizations such as Canadian University Services Overseas (loosely modeled on the US Peace Corps), Oxfam and a number of faith-based groups (perhaps even including the beneficiaries of my meagre Sunday School contributions) began to press for more openly democratic, participatory engagement, often with rather strident criticisms of government policies. Their aim was partly to become involved in direct assistance in Third World countries and partly to hold the authorities to account for their actions in pursuit of neocolonial economics and counterinsurgency where national liberation struggles had failed.

There was no small amount of grist for their mills. Led not merely to witness the plight of the downtrodden as a moral imperative, but also as a by-product of power relations, many of these groups began to branch out from generous but guileless charity work into more careful analysis and criticism. For a time, even the NGOs which recognized and were concerned about overarching state institutions and international authorities such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund were celebrated. They brought the soft power of civil society to bear on conditions that were hideously inadequate from the perspectives of education, health care and simple survival needs among what came famously to be called the “bottom billion” of humanity.

The instruments of civil society were acclaimed for seemingly selfless work on behalf of those who could not help themselves. And this is one place where the story gets particularly convoluted. Paradoxically, the apparent success of the NGOs was part of the problem. Between 1980 and 2005, the number of NGOs in Canada grew by more than 500%. The necessity of cooperation with state and corporate agencies led to complications in which pressure to follow neoliberal strategies became harder and harder to resist. Part of the predicament arose from the dependency of some organizations on financial and diplomatic facilitation by government; part occurred when government exercised its power to obstruct or eliminate dissident voices.

Nikolas Barry-Shaw & Dru Oja Jay raise some issues of corruption within some NGOs and point to administrators who “live like kings” amidst the poverty that they are ostensibly in the field to ameliorate, but these are relatively minor matters compared to the seduction and the consequent compromises that are forced upon NGOs that face the unsavoury dilemma of choosing between being opportunistically used as “cheerleaders” for government policies or losing the funding to carry on at all.

The book is packed with specific stories running from the engagingly anecdotal to mini-case studies in distortion and dishonesty bordering on (and sometimes exceeding) depravity. It should not, however, be read as an exposé, much less as an invitation to a sloppy cynicism that courts the conclusion that no one does good without an ulterior motive or that foreign assistance is nothing but a “con game.” The problem is not the people as such, but the immense power and authority of institutions that limit the best of good intentions and too often turn them to nefarious purposes.

There remain many, many “helping” groups which do actually help. Among them, unless I am horribly mistaken, are *Médecins Sans Frontières* and other humanitarian groups of which I am

tempted to give examples, but will refrain lest I leave too many out. They operate, however, within an imperial global structure in which they can be manipulated into doing rather more harm than good by helping to prop up precisely those institutions and enterprises which are mainly responsible for the poverty and disease in the first place.

Today, of course, the Government of Canada has become much less subtle in its foreign policy agenda, substituting weapons sales for peace-keeping forces and the support of exploitative resource-based industries with records of blatant human rights abuses. The de-funding of KAIROS, an NGO which had the audacity to hint that, contrary to Prime Minister Harper's single-minded line on the matter, Israel might have to share some culpability for the human rights abuses and poverty in the Near East.

Accordingly, it is becoming ever more evident that authentic world-wide efforts to assist people in desperate need will depend on a broader effort to alter national policies in the West. By taking us through the events in Haiti in a meticulous and mainly chronological account of the transition of "Canada's development NGOs from idealism to imperialism," *Paved with Good Intentions* informs and enlightens us. We should not, however, come away shaking our heads sadly in dismay or smugly with a sense of vindication for preternatural scorn for perennial "do-gooders." We must not selfishly vow never to be suckered into foreign (or domestic) assistance schemes, even if only to the extent of contributing a few dollars to an attractive charity.

Quite the contrary, the effect of this well-written and convincing book should be to interrogate relentlessly not only the government's foreign aid establishment, but also its overall foreign political and economic policies that not only contribute to the squalor of the least fortunate abroad, but also do no good for the increasing number of poor at home.

About the Reviewer:

Howard A. Doughty teaches political economy at Seneca College in Toronto, Canada. He can be reached at howard_doughty@post.com.

References

Banfield, E. 1958. *The Moral Basis of a Backward Society*. Glencoe, IL: Free Press.

Fanon, F. 1963. *The Wretched of the Earth*. New York: Grove Press.

Lewis, O. 1961. *The Children of Sanchez: Autobiography of a Mexican Family*. New York: Random House.

Lipset, S. 1963. *The First New Nation: The United States in Historical and Comparative Perspective*. New York: Basic Books.

Rostow, W. 1960. *The Stages of Economic Growth: A Non-Communist Manifesto*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.