Book Review

William Easterley
White Man's Burden: Why the West's Efforts to Aid the Rest Have Done So Much Ill and So Little Good
New York: Penguin, 2005

Reviewed by Howard A. Doughty

Most readers of *The Innovation Journal* are likely to be familiar with the source of William Easterly's main title, and what I take to be its ironic intent. Still, a refresher may be in order.

In 1899, Sir Rudyard Kipling offered his English readers the following verse:

Take up the White Man's burden –
Send forth the best ye breed –
Go bind your sons to exile
To serve your captives' need;
To wait in heavy harness,
On fluttered folk and wild –
Your new-caught, sullen peoples,
Half-devil and half-child.

Take up the White Man's burden –
The savage wars of peace –
Fill full the mouth of Famine
And bid the sickness cease;
And when your goal is nearest
The end for others sought,
Watch sloth and heathen Folly
Bring all your hopes to nought.

The irony may be double, if Kipling's defenders are correct in saying that the poem (which stretches on to seven stanzas) was composed as a sardonic satire on British jingoism and nascent cultural imperialism; or, it may be that Kipling simply meant what he said. If the latter, this poem stands as a testament to hypocrisy and a false rationale for imperialism as an exercise in philanthropy.

William Easterly's purpose in *White Man's Burden* is nothing if not clear. He wants to put an end to what he deems to be the most counter-productive contemporary approach to development. He believes that it mimics Kipling's imperial idealism, at least insofar as it disguises dubious

motives behind a veil of benign intensions. The contemporary development industry, involving an array of academic analysts, government bureaucrats, official international agencies, NGOs and rock stars such as Bob Geldoff and Bono, is portrayed by Easterly as thriving in the discredited Kiplingesque tradition. They generate utopian schemes, engage in fruitless social engineering projects, toss good money after bad and fail at (almost) all times to achieve positive results in poor nations. Indeed, if their efforts did not pay off handsomely for themselves, they could be diagnosed as organizationally insane – which can be described as repeating unsuccessful strategies in the vain hope that the same action, repeated often enough, will yield different results. Their motto might be: "If it didn't work yesterday, we'll do the same thing today … only more so."

This is what Easterly has to say about his Homeric rival, Jeffrey Sachs:
"Sachs is returning to the way things were done 50 years ago, it's like in the *Back to the Future* movies … Take a look at Korea: the economy was growing at around 3%, the United States shut down the aid flow and growth picked up to 10%. No poverty trap there. China is another example, it's moving ahead without any aid. This is what infuriates me about Sach's intellectual irresponsibility. He's promoting ideas which have been abandoned by the whole development profession with the exception of a handful. He is popularizing them, and that's extremely dangerous because bad ideas can kill, literally."

Easterly also directs his fire at those who follow people like Sachs. "If today the people of certain countries are as poor as they were a few decades ago, it's partly because some vested interests are an obstacle; but it's also because bad economic ideas have been applied: central planning, socialism … over and over again."

What, then, does Easterly propose? Rescued from his unrelentingly deep purple prose, his recommendations seem sensible enough. He urges that attention be given to people "on the ground," so to speak. Instead of massive injections of funds to national and international projects, he suggests smaller ventures that have a higher likelihood of success because they connect with local communities and foster local interests. It is not that Easterly opposes all foreign aid; he seems merely to want it to be more focused, less grandiose and more directed toward short-term

assistance that might produce better long-term self-reliance. "Give a man a fish, you feed him for a day; teach a man to fish, you feed him for a life-time," and all that.

Easterly is especially upset at what he calls the arrogance of Western development experts whom he sees as entering into situations from above, convinced of their own brilliance, imperiously self-righteous and secretively contemptuous of the people they are purportedly trying to help. It is the missionary position all over again.

From this perspective, it is not difficult to draw an inference from Easterly's enduring complaint. Max Boot, makes the point in *The Savage Wars of Peace: Small Wars and the Rise of America's Power* (2003): "In the early twentieth century, Americans talked of spreading Anglo-Saxon civilization and taking up the 'white man's burden'; today they talk of spreading democracy and defending human rights. Whatever you call it, this represents an idealistic impulse that has always been a big part in America's impetus for going to war."

In fact, Easterly himself draws a similar conclusion. The grand development strategies, he says, amount to a "repetition of the mistakes committed in the war in Iraq: a naïve and arrogant focus on solving problems from the top with a big plan; and without having the slightest idea about the often confusing realities underlying these problems. It's as difficult to reform and improve the foreign aid system as it is to democratize the Middle East."

The proposition that the invasion and occupation of Iraq was ever motivated by a desire to defend human rights or to democratize the Middle East is another – but related – matter, and will not be discussed here. Rather, the more immediate question is whether the "whole development profession" merely another guise for furthering Western domination of the underdeveloped countries? It may be, but this is not the direction in which Easterly seems determined to go. *White Man's Burden* seems more inclined toward what might, in other circumstances, be called the advocacy of "tough love." He acknowledges that international assistance has its place, but he insists that "aid has to be focused on those areas where it works, with quantifiable objectives and by organizations which can be held accountable. Such unquantifiable things as fighting poverty in general or promoting economic progress have to be kept out of foreign aid."

Easterly is especially hostile to the United Nations' Millennium Development Goals. Directed by Jeffrey Sachs, this initiave is dedicated to cutting world poverty in half by 2010. It may accomplish this goal depending on how low the standard is set, and which countries are to be included in the assessment. The economic growth of China alone, might come close to tipping the scales, depending upon what is agreed to be the operational definition of poverty. If, however, it is like most other campaigns to reduce agony and enhance liberty, it is likely to miss its target. With this in mind, it is not hard to rankle at photo-op philanthropy and to sympathize with Easterly's scepticism.

The problem comes with the scope of Easterly's vision. He is right to say that pompous public relations campaigns are not to be encouraged, and that attention should be paid to work which accomplishes concrete tasks that help people to help themselves. He is right to insist that aid packages have specific purposes that are immediate, effective and transparent and involve indigenous populations in the administration of funds. He is all for targeted projects that "give food supplements to these undernourished children, or piped water to these villages which lack it, or vaccinate this population"; however, once minimal survival has been assured, Easterly quickly falls back upon a model of private investment that resembles the early phases of Western capitalism and eschews dreaded socialism. He expresses his preferred methods in these terms: "Poverty never has been ended and never will be ended by foreign experts or foreign aid. Poverty will end as it has ended everywhere else, by homegrown political, economic, and social reformers and entrepreneurs that unleash the power of democracy and free markets."

In Easterly's scheme of things, the best plan for development is to have no plan, to embrace the free market and to step forward and grasp the "invisible hand." He disdains the aspirations of well-fed "planners," and contrasts them to lean and hungry "searchers." His litany is intended demolish the former: "In foreign aid," he says, "planners announce good intentions but don't motivate anyone to carry them out; Searchers find things that work and get some reward. Planners raise expectations but take no responsibility for meeting them; Searchers accept responsibility for their actions. Planners determine what to supply; Searchers find out what is in demand. Planners apply global blueprints; Searchers adapt to local conditions. Planners at the top lack knowledge of the bottom; Searchers find out what the reality is at the bottom. Planners never

hear whether the planned got what it needed; Searchers find out whether the customer is satisfied."

This, observes Harvard's esteemed economist Amartya Sen, is at best a gross oversimplification. He adds that Easterly's "overblown attack on global 'do-gooders' obscures the real point: that aid can work, but only if done right." Sen outlined some of the major methodological, logical and rhetorical flaws in *White Man's Burden* in an article published in the March/April, 2006 issue of *Foreign Affairs*. I will repeat only the one he admits is less important, but which has the virtue of brevity. Easterly points out that "there was no Marshall Plan for Harry Potter, no International Financing Facility for books about underage wizards." Moreover, he says with evident sincerity, "it is heartbreaking that global society has evolved a highly efficient way to get entertainment to rich adults and children, while it can't get twelve-cent medicine to dying poor children." Just so. The market is a terrible place to find a cure for heartbreak.

To this unusual display of sentimentalism, Sen responds that "the disparity in the results is indeed heartbreaking. But jumping from there to arguing that the solution to the latter problem is along the same lines as the solution to the former reflects a misunderstanding of what makes the latter so much more difficult." He then adds that "J. K. Rowling was on welfare support and received a grant from the Scottish Arts Council when writing the first Harry Potter novel." Apparently, untargeted aid sometimes hits the mark.

Unsympathetic critics charge that Easterly exaggerates, which he does. They say he uses inappropriate comparisons, which he does (the absence of foreign aid may not be the *real* reason that China has gained economic power). They also argue that he has become a shill for neoliberal ideologues and greedy global corporations which dislike any effort to enhance the lives of the poor, especially if such programs run the risk of leading to state-mandated increases in wages, trade union rights, safe working conditions, employment equity, environmental protection and so on, which is probably an unfair accusation but not wholly out of the range of possibility (even capitalists have their "useful idiots").

Sympathetic critics agree with many of Easterly's case studies of waste, profligacy and self-aggrandizement among professional helpers. For those who recall the book and know the origin

of the phrase, there is much to be said for the good works of the "ugly American," a noble and dedicated aid worker in 1950s Sarkhan (a thinly veiled fictional Vietnam) whom Easterly would surely credit for selfless devotion to helping people "on the ground." As well, they lament his tendency to overstatement and his preference for acrimony where decent and more productive dialogue could have been established.

What remains obscure and especially worrisome, however, is how desperately poor people with doubtless demands but little capacity to purchase any available supplies can be expected to transform bare subsistence economies into flourishing exchanges of surplus goods and what happens afterwards in those instances where foreign assistance succeeds – either from the largesse of bumptious international aid boosters or from small scale Adam Smiths intent on freeing up enterprise and searching for success.

One way or another, a place will be found for large investors in the event that there are natural resources or human skills to be exploited at corporate rates. That may be a problem for another time, but it is still a problem. It has appeared in one form in Bolivia, where water is considered an important consumable. Private corporations (Suez from France and Bechtel for the USA) made agreements with the Bolivian government – under pressure from the World Bank – to privatize the country's water supply. The results were popular uprisings in Cochabamba and El Alto. Even among the poor in Latin America's poorest country, consumer rebellions have galvanized people against the world's most likely alternative to socialism. Peddling the kind of pre-industrial free market theories that have been eclipsed by the invention of the limited liability corporation may appeal to antiquarian populists and aging libertarians; but, in its own way, it is no less naïve than disseminating the dreams of bureaucratic do-gooders.

The slogan that adorns the World Bank Headquarters in Washington D. C. reads: "Our dream, a world free of poverty." Easterly, who worked for the World Bank for enough years to know, considers it a social engineering conglomerate; others see it as an instrument of corporate globalization. Both may be right. Perhaps there is another way.

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