

The Selfish Altruist: Relief Work in Famine and War by TONY VAUX
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This is a fascinating book. It is a highly personal perspective on the challenges of humanitarian aid provision, written by a very experienced practitioner. Tony Vaux joined Oxfam in 1972 as an idealistic Oxford University graduate, from 1984 onwards he was a coordinator of Oxfam's global emergency programmes, managing aid programmes in Ethiopia, Sudan, Mozambique, Somalia and Eastern Europe, and then, in 1999, he left the organisation, disillusioned and doubt-ridden. This book is a personal reassessment of his (and Oxfam's) experiences, in which he critically engages both with his reports at the time and with his own beliefs and assumptions.

The book works on a variety of levels. It is a provocative reassessment of Oxfam's work over the last twenty-five years but also raises important questions over the transformation of the humanitarian sphere since the end of the Cold War. The book's starting point, and the focus of Vaux's self-doubts, is the Kosovo war. The draping of NATO bombing in the mantle of humanitarianism (and Oxfam's complicity in this, 'remaining silent until after the bombing had finished') brought home to Vaux the moral ambiguities and political dangers implicit in humanitarian intervention in other people's affairs. As he confides: 'An increasing sense of profound uncertainty about the motivation for the Kosovo intervention made me ask whether everything I had done was similarly tainted with "spin". The value of my life's work suddenly seemed fragile and brittle. Was there any purity in humanitarianism at all?' (p.202)

Looking back with a critical and introspective eye, he wonders whether earlier Oxfam interference was equally tainted by organisational self-interest rather than altruism. In Ethiopia in 1984 was Oxfam reluctant to raise the dangers of famine because 'developmentalism' was the new vogue? In Mozambique did Oxfam turn a blind eye to the problems of government food management because the focus was political opposition to South Africa? In Afghanistan did the withdrawal of Oxfam from vital aid projects lead to thousands of unnecessary deaths because the agency, for internal reasons, wanted to demonstrate a high profile commitment to women's rights? In Somalia was the agency more concerned with media profile than helping the needy? Time and again, Vaux's self-doubts lead him to question the policy and the assumptions behind Oxfam's work. At times this can lead to a highly individualised view of the problems; regarding Eastern Europe, Vaux wonders if his concerns '& might appear as a form of racism. Did I respond to suffering among white people differently from suffering among black people?' (p.161) Despite a tendency to lapse into personal psychoanalysis, in his desire to 'minimise the self', his rich empirical insights from personal experience carry the book through.

At a broader level, he analyses how the renegotiation of state sovereignty in the aftermath of the Cold War has meant that governments have taken the lead in humanitarian intervention with the 'independence' of aid agencies being manipulated for political ends as they become 'contractors for governments'. He advocates that aid agencies need to defend the 'fundamental principle' of impartiality otherwise humanitarianism will lose credibility and 'the pursuit of altruism will be lost. Aid will become a tool of self interest.' (p.204) The book attempts to end on a positive note with guidelines to 'correct' the shift away from impartiality and towards politicisation and 'self interest'. However, Vaux in resigning from Oxfam, seems well aware that this view is at odds with current thinking within the organisation. It seems likely that his challenge can only be met by a new generation of 'idealists' untainted by the disillusioning experiences so acutely analysed here.

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