The Color of Hunger

RACE AND HUNGER
IN NATIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL PERSPECTIVE

Edited by
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The first book ever to examine the links between hunger and race, *The Color of Hunger* probes the contemporary and historical reasons hunger is concentrated among people of color, both domestically and globally. In eleven new essays, activists and distinguished scholars from across disciplines examine the race-hunger connection from political, sociological, anthropological, historical, economic, and geographical perspectives.

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The attached chapter was adapted from an informal talk at a conference on race and hunger at the University of California, Berkeley (April 1992). While there has been significant (but incomplete) progress since 1992 and my own understanding has also evolved, the task of reimagining and transforming the culture of altruism remains vital and unfinished in 2020.

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CHAPTER 6

Multilateralism, Racism, and the Culture of Altruism

Nazir Ahmad

In this chapter, I am interested in probing the connection between hunger and poverty, on the one hand, and implicit racism in international agencies, on the other. Since this is a quite broad topic, I have chosen to make it more manageable by focusing specifically on two types of multilateral institutions—large development or aid agencies and the media. Some readers may be surprised that I would choose to include the media as one of my selections, but the media is a powerful molder of international norms and values. The growing concentration of media ownership by a small number of transnational conglomerates makes it an important institution to examine in connection with our topic. My approach in this chapter is deliberately conversational; I combine autobiographical reflection and cultural critique. My main point can be summarized succinctly: these international institutions are often unconscious of their racism and, despite an appearance of multiculturalism, often promote policies and practices that work to the detriment of poor people of color.

International Aid Agencies

The issue of multilateral development agencies and racism is a complicat-

ed one for at least two reasons. First, it gets complicated due to our own illusions about what these organizations really are. Without knowing much about them, we have vested these international agencies with our intentions, hopes, and ideals. We expect these agencies, with their great charters and compelling rhetoric, to actually implement policies reflecting a common vision of a better life for humanity. And sometimes when we hear the speeches given at the United Nations and other such fora, we are tempted to think that maybe that is indeed the case. If this chapter accomplishes nothing else, I hope it will dispel this illusion.

Second, the theme of multilateral aid agencies and racism is complicated because the flaws of international institutions cannot simply or strictly be analyzed in terms of racism, as we typically understand that word. In fact, if participation meant representation, then, at least superficially, multilateral agencies are nondiscriminatory, because they incorporate considerable racial/ethnic diversity. Nonetheless, racism does exist in these agencies, and this has an impact on the realities of world hunger.

Let me begin to approach our theme by offering a trivial, but symbolically powerful, anecdote. At least twice in the past decade, there have been demonstrations outside the United Nations by its employees. I remember walking by one of them in 1987, and I distinctly remember one big poster. It read: "Let's march today, and let us show our anger and outrage. It simply cannot continue this way." For a brief moment, I felt quite inspired. If the United Nations' employees themselves were standing outside protesting what was going on in the world, I thought, then maybe their idealism was going to take some concrete shape and have some effect. Then I discovered that the demonstration--quite a lively one, quite a multiracial one, as well--was about lowering U.N. employee parking-garage fees, and not about improving the welfare of the poor! The parking fees had been hiked from $20 to $80 a month. Outrageous? Perhaps, though neighborhood parking normally went for about $300.

Similarly, in 1991, there were demonstrations by employees of the United Nations. This time, these idealistic people working to create a more just and united world took to the streets to vocalize their demand for higher wages. Maybe higher wages were in order; that is not my point. The issue has to do with values and priorities and mindsets. It has to do more with what was not being protested than with what was.

Perhaps we are not ready to endorse the specific hierarchy of priorities and values that predominate in international agencies, but that does not make them guilty of racism. What about racism? If you simply look at the crowd in and around the United Nations, or walk into any office associated with it, you may well be pleasantly surprised by the rainbow of people, both in the general work force and among those in charge. The same is true of most international development agencies. Walk into any room--the chances of finding a non-white are quite high. You'll find senior officials who are

African, Asian, or Latin American--holding high posts with considerable perks and privileges. Therefore, can we conclude that there is no racism in these institutions?

Implicit Racism

I believe there is considerable racism in most international institutions, but it is a racism of neglect rather than of intent. It is subtle, it is underlying, and it is difficult to detect with conventional lenses. If we define racism as deliberate exclusion from a position, privilege, or organization based on skin color, then we would have to conclude that most international public organizations are remarkably nonracist. But if we judge these organizations in terms of the impact of their work, we would have to conclude that, too often, people of color have borne the harshest part of economic and political changes, including those orchestrated by international aid agencies. In other words, despite a presumed lack of such intent, an uncanny racial bias exists in the consequences of many actions and policy decisions of multilateral agencies. This, of course, is a generalization, and, thankfully, one also finds exceptions to this.

As an illustration, let us consider the World Bank, by any standard a powerful designer of economic change in many poor countries. I've had two different occasions to work at the World Bank, and each time I was impressed by its intellectual firepower and financial resources. I was also impressed by how little overt racism existed there. The first time, I worked for a Kenyan, who reported to an American, who reported to a Pakistani. Another time, I reported to an Israeli, who reported to an Australian, who reported to a gentleman from Ghana. The Bank has developed the remarkable ability to overcome at least the more obvious forms of racism.

In light of the apparent multiculturalism in the Bank's chain of command, some observations seemed incongruent. One stood out with particular poignancy. Given the preponderance of staff from the Third World, I expected the entire organization to be infused with a sense of urgency and personal commitment to end poverty and injustice. Afterall, hunger is torturously killing people of color at such a rate that an outside observer (perhaps a newcomer from Mars) could plausibly conclude that the dominant North was engaged in a worldwide policy of "ethnic cleansing" by its inattention. But, somehow, it seemed that despite the representation of races, nations, and peoples, there was something even more powerful that made most employees conform to a rather uninspired state of being.

During the mid-1980s when I worked at the Bank, I found little sense of the urgency or impatience that our situation warranted. Most of us intellectually realized that we were losing the battle against poverty, but this realization alone made little difference to our everyday choices and routines. I remember on numerous occasions feeling that we were suspended in an ethical vacuum,

unsure of our personal commitments and psychologically distanced from the realities of poverty in our home countries. I remember feeling that many of us had lost our idealism and had become just cogs in an international bureaucracy that viewed development as its job but not its passion and dream. To understand the genesis of this reality, I think we need to examine the socialization process that occurs within most such agencies.

Most international agencies maintain that their best employees give up their national loyalties to become professional international civil servants. There is much to be said for eschewing national chauvinism and becoming global in one's orientation. But this particular process of socialization has a shadow side, as well. In the process of assimilating into this faceless international bureaucracy (with its own notions of careers, promotions, professionalism, and perks), many of us lose a sense of why we got into this line of work in the first place. This confusion is further exacerbated by the jargon and convoluted rhetoric that are the daily currency of many agencies. The process of conforming can become a process of deforming. I suspect that this rootless existence of some people (such as many of those inhabiting transnational agencies) is in part responsible for the insensitivity and maladroitness of many policies.

A number of months before the United Nations took action in Somalia, a most-senior African official of the United Nations appeared on "Nightline" and defended his organization's lethargic response to the crisis of Somalia. The kinds of procedural, bureaucratic, and jurisdictional excuses that he presented could have come out of a Franz Kafka novel. While people were being slaughtered and starved on an unfathomable scale, he was passing the buck from one agency to another. His attitude would have made even Max Weber, the master of modern bureaucracy, cringe in disbelief. Just imagine what a difference a timely intervention by the United Nations might have made. As countries such as Somalia and Rwanda (among many others) lurch into ever-deepening crises, the leaders and officialdom of the United Nations seem ever so paralyzed, unclear about their own objectives and caught in the cross fire and politicking of member-states. Because the values and principles of the United Nations are rhetorically recited but inadequately internalized, the organization repeatedly finds itself following the path of least resistance.

Socialization and Implicit Racism

How is it that we, people of goodwill and of color, who have been entrusted with the representation os the world's conscience, have become so immune to the realities of hunger, poverty, and injustice? A partial explanation of this paradox might lie in psychological reflections offered by people such as Albert Memmi and Frantz Fanon. Memmi, in his landmark book, *The Colonizer and the Colonized*, and Fanon, in *Black Skin, White Mask* and *The Wretched of the Earth*, grasped a fundamental truth: one's skin color is

a weak indicator of one's ethnic identity and pride. Those who watched the confirmation hearings for Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas may also have been reminded of this.

Memmi, in his analysis, probes the impact of the encounter between the West and the colonized nations. He compellingly depicts the powerlessness and dehumanization of the indigenous populations that resulted from this unequal interaction. Memmi maintains that in a context of such powerlessness, it is not surprising that there emerged a group of people who decided to mimic the oppressors—and to serve them. There is an irony to this: those among the oppressed who do the oppressor's dirty work frequently find themselves at war with their own consciences. They may be at war with their own consciences, but the lure and security associated with the status quo usually prevail.

Many of us who were born privileged in the colonial or postcolonial Third World have our own split identities. Frantz Fanon tells a story that echoes through the halls of many of our personal memories. He talks about growing up in Martinique in a very elite family, being told that he was French, and finally showing up in Paris to study psychiatry, quite enamored of the French. He thought of himself as a part of that culture, only to discover that as far as *they* were concerned, he was only an imposter.

A number of years ago, a *New Yorker* magazine cartoon depicted a cocktail party with some humans and a dog milling about. The dog had joined the conversation, was bow-tied and suited, and was standing on its hind legs, while holding a wine glass with its forelegs. The caption was: "He thinks he is one of us." I suspect that many of us—people from developing countries working in international aid organizations—may really be the dogs of the development cocktail party if we uncritically accept and join the status quo.

In the bureaucratic trenches of the United Nations and other multilateral agencies, staff from Third World countries become alienated from their own roots. They become disconnected emotionally, if not always cognitively, from the social conditions prevalent in the cultures and societies from which they have come. These people, in a sense, are in an in-between land. They are people who exploit the fact that they're interested in poverty; they claim certain expertise, credibility, and even a certain exemption from accountability because they come from poor countries. Yet their social consciousness is not reflective of their roots. They studied development mostly in Western institutions; they work in elite circles where Western modes of thought are normative; many do not even have social contacts apart from the affluent. It is not surprising that they are hesitant to disrupt the status quo. They are beneficiaries after all of the very system of affluence and poverty that they purport to change. It is an unholy arrangement, where righteousness and peddling poverty become a source of financial and positional reward.

When I was originally approached to contribute a chapter to this volume, the topic was to be my country of origin, Bangladesh. I was very tempted, but

I had to decline that particular topic. It would have bordered on the disingenuous for someone who has lived in the United States for nearly twenty years to claim expertise or any deep knowledge of Bangladesh. I am familiar with some of those realities, but my own views are in many ways influenced by my own privileged upbringing and subsequent migration to the West. I can sympathize, but I cannot totally empathize, with the plight of the poor in Bangladesh. I told the editor that if he wanted an analysis of race and hunger there, he should not expect intermediaries like me to speak with a great deal of authenticity. But you see, I was invited to write the chapter not only because I am originally from Bangladesh, but also because in many ways I am more like the audience of this book than like those I was asked to write about. The sad truth is that I know your game and language well enough that if I claimed profound expertise on Bangladesh, you could not tell otherwise. Paulo Freire aptly observed that the poor are spoken of, spoken for, and spoken to, but seldom do they get a chance to speak for themselves.

The International Development Elite

The development elite are a powerful group, and I say this without being pejorative. Owing to their power, it is imperative that we understand how their ideas for global solutions to global problems are being developed. Who is developing these ideas? Which institutions influence the direction of these ideas? Whose ideas are likely to gain support and whose are likely to be neglected? And, finally, what characteristics define this multiracial, multicultural, and yet surprisingly uniform development elite?

There is much to commend about those who inhabit the inner sanctums of international development organizations. They all recognize that our planet and its people grow more fragile and precarious by the day. They are all convinced of the importance of such fundamentals as basic human rights, the need for peace, the concept (in principle) of sustainable development. No one argues that hunger is a justifiable condition. Few actively promote racism. Still, there are aspects of their ideology, their culture, and their view of development that I find troubling and that, in turn, lead to a toleration of hunger and poverty among people of color in this world.

Not long ago I was on a plane to Washington D.C., sitting next to a West African development expert returning from a mission to another West African country.[1] While describing his activities, he started referring condescendingly to his host countrymen as "those people." Somewhat perplexed, I asked him, "Sir, where are you from?" He replied firmly, "I'm from Washington D.C." But I queried further, "Is that where you were born?" "No," he replied. As the conversation progressed, we talked about his roots, upbringing, and professional experience. As we talked on, he concluded, "You know, I guess you are right. I'm really one of them, but I am not sure anymore because *I can no longer relate to them.*" Therein lies the rub.

Nowhere is the implicit racism of international aid bureaucracies more evident than in the ways in which we support a veritable army of foreign experts in developing countries. Where technical skills combined with common sense, compassion, and a spirit of appreciative inquiry is necessary, we bring in high-paid, self-promoting "experts" who tell "them" at best what they already know, but in a language that is no longer accessible. By creating this new caste of development experts, we have confused rather than eased the path to social progress.

As a consultant myself, I have a healthy regard for the value of independent perspectives and expertise. But I also know that too often the advice provided by outside experts on development is not worth the paper it is presented on—and certainly not worth the bill that comes with it. Furthermore, I submit to you that too large a portion of the international technical assistance is driven by a sense of white superiority (however subtle) and donor nationalism, rather than the actual needs of development. Those of you who have worked in the development field know only too well the phenomenon of itinerant, Western consultants who spend the first half of their extended visits learning from those on the ground and the second half of their tenure pontificating to those from whom they have just learned.

Right now, there are about 80,000 foreign (read Western) experts in Africa, and it costs a minimum of $150,000 a year per person to keep them there. I ask you, how many of these so-called experts know more about Africa than their African counterparts? The European Development Fund, which was set up as Europe's conscientious response to the crises in their old colonies, has foreign expatriates running about 90 percent of its projects in Africa, the Caribbean, and the Pacific. Throughout the Third World, we spend a staggering $15 to $22 billion a year—a third to a half of all bilateral and multilateral foreign aid money—to support Western experts, who live like nobility and speak nobly of the poor. By overpaying expatriates and a select group of privileged nationals, we are practicing a kind of foreign aid apartheid, all the while preaching the good words of self-determination, self-reliance, and progress at the grassroots. Is this really the best way to engender indigenous capabilities? Foreign expertise can be helpful and well worth its price tag, but only if such expertise is focused on critical needs and rapidly builds self-sustainability.

The Ideology of Development

Just as in Manifest Destiny, or Christopher Columbus's "discovery" of the Americas, or the British "civilizing" India, all modern development paradigms, capitalist as well as socialist, start with a model of an ideal world that is defined in European materialist terms. It assumes that all people of the world are on the same path, with the white West leading the way and the nonwhite Third World following.

The dominant paradigm is captured by W.W. Rostow's book, *The Stages of Economic Growth*. Although Rostow himself was far more cautious and understood subtleties, those who took his mantle basically reduced the countries of the world and their economic history into stages of economic "growing up." First you have infancy, the stage that a number of countries are said still to be in. Then you develop certain infrastructure to facilitate private capitalism and a certain necessary concentration of productive capital. As you continue to develop, you move in a straight line until, finally, you're ready to "take off" economically. I don't quite know where, but at some point, a country reaches the nirvana of development. This is the basic formula, admittedly simplified and caricatured, that all so-called Third World countries are asked to follow.

Have you ever wondered what this "development nirvana" would look like? How many McDonald's should it have? How many Nintendo games per household? How many cable channels and tanning salons? I know I am being facetious, but less so than you think. The fact remains that the current development paradigm simply tries to mimic (but not challenge) the economic, cultural, and social transformations that the Euro-based industrial societies went through, presumably toward similar ends. Development assistance, as currently formulated, is designed to help people do the best they can within rigid constraints. It is designed to help people play the modern economic game, and to play it more efficiently; it is not designed to reinvent the game or alter the balance of power.

I want to emphasize that the problem is not one of a lack of good intention or good will. The same kind of arrogance and the same kind of unconsciously racist assumptions come from people whose individual moral character is beyond reproach. Let me illustrate. Consider Larry Summer, the former chief economist of the World Bank and now the Under Secretary of the U.S. Treasury. A distinguished academician, Summer recognized that the West had a severe pollution problem and a high cost for health care. Following a certain logic inherent in a certain economic worldview, Summer came up with a quite rational yet ethically unacceptable alternative: the West could export its toxic wastes to poor countries, where both life and land were cheap.

In summary, multinational development organizations exhibit a cultural affinity toward a Western, primarily European, view of development. The people of color in these organizations are largely from affluent classes who have been educated in Western or Western-influenced institutions. Many of them have become psychologically distanced from the histories and conditions of the popular struggles in their countries of origin. They have gone through a process of socialization that has dulled their idealism and tempered their sense of urgency.

Racism and the Media

I refer to the mass media as multilateral organizations because, as Noam Chomsky and even those in the mainstream point out, we are in the midst of the globalization and concentration of media control around the world. And I think it is important that we do not focus on multilateral aid agencies in isolation, but rather look at the broad cultural context that shapes their (and our) views.

According to contemporary development ideology, despite whispers to the contrary, development is something that we do to the poor. Progress is something that is done to them. Those who it is done to really have no say. It puts human beings in the position of having to receive, react, and conform. And we support this imposition through a culture of arrogant altruism.

The Media and the Culture of Altruism

According to the popular image, development assistance is an altruistic burden shouldered by the generous West to help the helpless and often ungrateful Third World. This viewpoint persists despite the demonstrable fact that most foreign aid creates a net economic benefit for the donors. Therefore, it is not surprising that at times of economic difficulties in affluent nations, foreign aid becomes a favorite scapegoat. This misinformed view of foreign aid endures because it ultimately reinforces Western claims of moral superiority. The truth is, this "altruism" is without sacrifice. It is ultimately self-serving. This culture of altruism finds no small measure of its legitimacy through the mass media.

One of the best illustrations of how the media builds and reinforces this culture is the portrayal it offered of the U.S. intervention in Somalia in the fall of 1992. If one were to believe the popular media, both print and electronic, the U.S. Marines invaded the African country of Somalia to relieve the severe famine taking place and to restore civil order. Both of these, of course, would be purely altruistic motives. But a number of facts do not fit well with the descriptions and images offered the American public.

First of all, we were rarely told that the crisis in Somalia was largely one of our own making. After all, those weapons shouldered by Somali pre-adolescents were supplied from our arsenals. In the 1980s, we supplied more than $100 in military aid for every man, woman, and child in Somalia, at a time when the country was terrorized by a cruel dictatorship.[2] Yet more important, the invasion itself had numerous counterproductive effects. For example, instead of dealing with traditional leaders, such as community elders, the U.S. invasion force dealt exclusively with the Somali warring military leaders, thereby strengthening the position of the very people we claimed to be putting under wraps. We stated that our aim was to restore peace, but the internal peace negotiations, which had advanced to a critical stage, including

plans for pivotal meetings between elders and intellectuals, collapsed in the wake of the Marines' invasion.[3] Finally, the famine itself, well into its second year, was already beginning to ebb about the time the Marines were storming the beaches of Mogadishu under the glare of camera lights. In fact, the death toll had fallen by 90 percent between July and November.[4]

So why did the Marines invade? It is undeniable that some of the motivation and support came from our genuine concern. A number of influential strategists seemed to believe that in the post-cold war era, the military's immense logistical capabilities could be mobilized for humanitarian assistance. We also thought that it would be a relatively easy and painless venture to undertake. In addition, some have cynically observed that the Somalia intervention, conducted as it was in front of the world media, provided a perfect public relations showcase for the modern U.S. military. Whatever the complex mix of motivations, it is certainly the case that the media circus that surrounded the troops further reinforced traditional, negative stereotypes of Africans. Why, for instance, did the media refer to "tribal wars" and "warlords" in Somalia but not in Ireland or Bosnia?

Media Racism and the Victims of Famine

To illustrate further how the mainstream media reinforce a racially premised culture of altruism in the West, let us reflect on the coverage of the Ethiopian famine of the early 1980s. The Ethiopian famine was, you may recall, one of the hottest topics during 1984 and 1985 in both the electronic and print media. Largely as a result of massive coverage, hundreds of thousands of people from Europe and the United States were moved by compassion to contribute generously to the relief effort. Thousands of children saved money from school lunches to donate to starving children in Ethiopia. Rock musicians galvanized a generation of young people through a trans-Atlantic "Live Aid" concert designed to benefit African hunger relief. All in all, it was a remarkable and inspiring demonstration of compassion and generosity.

But, it is essential to add, the outflow of altruism was tinted by no small dose of racism. When all was said and done, one was left with a clear impression of white generosity and black need.[5] Hidden behind the veil of generosity were issues of structural injustice that went unaddressed. To illustrate the point further, it is helpful to probe how it is that the Ethiopian story ever achieved prominence in the first place.

Have you ever wondered how, of all places, Ethiopia visited you in your living room, appealing to your conscience? When we scrutinize the story behind the first telecast of the Ethiopian famine, we uncover a jolting truth: mortifying hunger among people of color is, with few exceptions, not considered newsworthy. So let's look at how Ethiopia came into our consciousness. The story begins, not with journalistic success, but with an aborted effort to bring Ethiopian hunger to world attention.[6]

Early in 1984, Bill Blakemore, an ABC journalist stationed in Rome, heard that there was a major crisis emerging in Ethiopia. He contacted ABC headquarters in New York and told them about the drought and looming famine and requested permission to travel with a film crew to the site. Permission was denied. Blakemore persisted and eventually was told to gather secondhand clips from other journalists and send them back for consideration. Discouraged, Blakemore (according to his own account) thought with justifiable cynicism: "There are people dying, but they're only black."[7] Nonetheless, he followed instructions. He gathered his footage, sent it to New York, but never received a reply.

Six months and thousands of deaths later, Michael Buerk, a BBC journalist normally stationed in Johannesburg, traveled to Ethiopia with a film crew and made a tape, which was quickly aired in Britain. The report so impacted the British viewers that they donated $10 million to relief agencies. None of the major media outlets in the United States, however, picked up the story.

Buerk returned to Ethiopia later that year. He found the famine had worsened monstrously. As his film crew shot footage of the famine, a child died on camera. In the village he visited, people were dying at the rate of one every twenty minutes. In his narrative, Buerk described it as "a famine of biblical proportion." On 22 October, he flew with his film crew back to London, and his story aired the next day on the BBC. The pictures were startling, the narrative jolting. It was one of the decade's most poignant and piercing pieces of broadcast journalism. In response, the phones of relief organizations rang off their hooks.

NBC had an exclusive arrangement with the BBC that gave it the right of first refusal for BBC international television reports. NBC's London bureau, knowing the value of the story, notified New York, but it found the New York management unresponsive. Apparently, the New York brass were operating according to a widely observed (but implicit) decision principle in television journalism that Peter Boyer, a *Los Angeles Times* bureau chief, summarizes as "the more distant the place and the darker its people, the slimmer a story's chances of making it on the air."[8]

It would certainly be a mistake to place the entire blame on network producers. Producers do not achieve their high-power positions by accident. One essential skill that they all possess is a keen ability to predict what is of interest to the viewing public. Though they clearly make mistakes, the Ethiopian story being one, they have a well-honed skill for reading the public mood. As a rule of thumb, the rules they use to decide what to place on the air are fruitful guides to understanding the culture of the intended audience. It is enlightening, then, to learn from a senior U.S. television executive that the operative geographic and racial math goes something like this: "One dead fireman in Brooklyn is worth five English bobbies, who are worth 50 Arabs, who are worth 500 Africans."[9]

As a result of the resistance of the NBC management to viewing the BBC

footage, Joseph Angotti, NBC's general manger of news in Europe, personally called New York from London, insisting that they at least take a look at the tape. Paul Greenberg, executive producer of "Nightly News," consented and the tape arrived by satellite just as the news crew was busily completing work for the evening's broadcast. As the tape began to feed into the New York monitors, work in the newsroom came to a halt, as everyone watched in stunned silence. Though there was lingering debate about whether to show the BBC piece or a tape about Cadillacs belonging to the Rajneesh of Oregon, Tom Brokaw settled it by insisting on the Ethiopian story. That evening, 23 October, after the famine was already many months long, the starving Ethiopians visited the living rooms of America.

After the initial U.S. broadcast, the public response was tremendous. Belatedly, dozens of additional stories were done by all the major networks. NBC ran an unusual full-page advertisement in the *Washington Post,* congratulating itself on its famine coverage. Ethiopia, in a sense, became the latest television icon. Even Ronald Reagan, the coldest of the cold warriors, who previously refused all aid to Ethiopia, relented to the power of the medium that had created him. Under the weight of public opinion and congressional pressure spearheaded by the late Mickey Leland, he authorized humanitarian aid to Ethiopia.

Before we congratulate ourselves about how generous and concerned we once were about Ethiopia, let us remember that Ethiopia entered our consciousness and energized our commitments due to happenstance; and even with these factors going for it, the story was told only after untold human misery went unreported for lack of interest. The eventual airing of the Ethiopian tragedy was a result, in part, of someone preferring that story over one about some fringe leader in Oregon who loved Cadillacs. If we are serious about being global citizens, we cannot rely on such belated accidents. And I assure you that, while some network personnel admitted to being spooked by the blistering success of a story that they themselves had earlier rejected as unmarketable, few people in the media have changed the way stories are evaluated and selected.

If Peter Boyer is correct in his summation that "the more distant the place and the darker its people, the slimmer a story's chances of making it on the air," then we need to reflect on the media's image of the U.S. population's interest. Let us not forget that the media is an incredibly powerful institution that shapes our mind, shapes our soul, and shapes our interpretations of the world. I have a great deal of respect and awe for the potential of modern media, but so far it has failed to demonstrate enough courage or vision to be trusted. We cannot allow the pundits of the media to unilaterally shape our agenda any more than we can allow the experts of development.

Media and the Trivialization of the Third World

The media punditry prevail because we permit them to reduce complexity to sound-bite simplicity. And in the process, we neglect some fundamental truths. All you have to do is listen critically to the respectable popular media and you will notice it for yourselves. Let me give just a few brief examples, in case you thought that the delay in reporting on Ethiopia was an unfortunate exception. A number of years ago, my college-mates and I were watching the CBS "Evening News," and Dan Rather introduced his story something like this: "Vietnam, the war that took 55,000 precious human lives..." This sounded so poetic and poignant that it took me a few seconds to comprehend the implications of his words. You see, I thought of Vietnam first as a country with a rich and colorful civilization and as a site of war second. And 55,000 precious human lives? What about the hundreds of thousands of Vietnamese who were slaughtered during the same war? Could he mean that only the lives of the U.S. soldiers were precious? And did Dan Rather not know that the body count of the U.S. dead was almost double the 55,000 he cited, if all the U.S. veterans of the war who died from suicides, mysterious single-car accidents, and psychological trauma were included? I believe that Dan Rather had no intention to mislead us, but in the process of making the short sound bite, he left out some vital and pertinent facts.

Let me give you other brief examples. At the end of the Persian Gulf War, National Public Radio hosted a panel to discuss the media coverage of the war. A number of journalists criticized the manner in which the Pentagon spoon-fed news to the media, which, in turn, regurgitated it to the public. But toward the end of the program, the moderator (a distinguished journalist whom I admire) prefaced her last question by stating, "But given that only a few lives were lost in this war, do you think...?" Again, you see, she inadvertently but nonetheless inexcusably implied that the 140,000 Iraqis who died in the war (about 100,000 of whom were buried alive) did not fit into our census of human lives. Abraham Lincoln, during the bitter Civil War, constantly stressed the need for magnanimity upon military victory. But how can we be magnanimous if we don't even acknowledge our actions?

Finally, let me offer a more personal example. Some of you may recall that there was a massive tidal wave in my native Bangladesh in 1991 that took over 200,000 lives. All public telecommunications lines to the country were out, and the news media was my sole source of information on the calamity. I turned on the local television news that night, and near the end of the broadcast, the anchor spent perhaps twenty seconds mentioning that a huge tidal wave had swept through Bangladesh, killing many thousands. The item was immediately followed by the weatherman, who did his human interest introduction by quipping that the weather of San Francisco was so much more appealing to tourists than that of Bangladesh. I suspect that if London had been the site of the catastrophe, it would not have been so quickly glossed over and then used as a backdrop for humor.

The World Beyond Racism

The theme of this book is racism and hunger, so I wanted to first express my views on this intersection. As I have outlined, I believe that there is indeed a pattern of implicit racism that has shaped the dominant ideologies of development (of both left and right) and the practices of the media. It is a racism that leads to a dulling of our sense of moral outrage, to the point that we quietly tolerate hunger among massive numbers of people of color. Ultimately, however, I am not at all certain that solving the racism problem alone will get us far enough.

In the long run, it is quite conceivable that race will diminish as a prime human differentiator. Instead, class, education, wealth, access to information, and cultural orientation may play the lead roles in separating the haves from the have-nots, the helpers from those chosen to be helped. We must be skeptical of solving the race problems without addressing the fundamental question of how the poor and the weak of all races might gain equitable access to resources, power, and opportunities on a global scale.

Senegalese economist Samir Amin observed in 1975 that in a world of an emergent multinational elite, differences of ethnicities would be overcome by the convergence of economic interests, shared worldviews, and a "Western" consumption-driven lifestyle.[10] Jacques Attali, the controversial and extravagant former president of the European Bank of Reconstruction & Development, also observed the same phenomenon—of what he called the "affluent nomad."[11] This nomad has no national identity or responsibility, but is able to claim the whole world as his or her own, connected by the best communications technology, consumerist culture, and ease of travel for those who can afford it.

The growing unification of the affluent of the world across national, cultural and racial boundaries through the power of technology, investment, and market integration poses an interesting situation for those who are advocates for the poor. I believe that this process of realignment can also create opportunities to redefine perspectives and priorities. The challenge before us is to harness the power of these same technologies to work toward a new "people-centered multinationalism," bringing together people of concern and goodwill from across the world (including businesses and governments, when appropriate). We, too, can collaborate across national, linguistic, and ethnic boundaries. Organizations such as the Institute for Global Communications (providers of PeaceNet and other progressive computer networks) are hard at work creating a communications infrastructure that will allow nongovernmental organizations and private citizens to effectively reach and communicate with one another. Organizations such as Business for Social Responsibility are working to be similar catalysts in the for-profit sector.

I was asked recently whether I supported the idea of the United Nations,

and I said that I did, unequivocally. But to me, the United Nations is not the existing edifices in New York and Geneva. Lofty as their goals were, the founders of the United Nations made one fundamental error. They assumed that we lived in a world where member governments would automatically represent the best interests of their peoples. We have learned that most governments care first about securing and staying in power, second, about enriching themselves, and only third about improving the well-being of their people. Given this hierarchy of priorities, it is not at all surprising that the United Nations, as an organization, despite spurts of efforts, has made only limited headway in solving the endemic problems of poverty, hunger, racism, civil war, and other human-rights violations.

So is there hope in all this? Is multilateralism bound to fail, and should all of us just look inward, circle our wagons, and forget about the rest of the world? The answer to this question depends on your point of view. As you may have heard, the optimist sees the glass as half full; the pessimist sees it as half empty. But the activist simply takes the glass, empties what isn't needed, and fills it with what is more useful. I would recommend, that instead of abandoning multilateralism, we redefine it with a new covenant between the leaders and the led. There will not be a better time than now for beginning this recasting. We have now a rare moment in human history, when the dominant paradigms of yesterday are clearly not working. In the despair and anxiety that one finds in so many places lie the potential seeds of hope and the germination of change. It is time for all of us, as people of concern and goodwill, to reach out to international institutions and internationalist individuals, to governments and popular movements, to leaders and the led, and articulate a new global ethic—one based on the principles of justice, accountability, humility, and the cultivation of curiosity and openness. Often imperfect organizations can be transformed, but only if there is a clarity of vision and a commitment to change.

Those of us who have had the privilege of education and access to opportunities have a special obligation to help transform the institutions in which we work. To be a change agent from inside is especially difficult, because it is much safer and comfortable to *go along to get along.* For us to be effective as change agents, according to the brilliant Edward Said, we must be thinking people motivated not by financial reward or approval of superiors, but rather by a deep sense of care and affection. Our problem, Said observed, is to "deal with the impingements of modern professionalization...but not by pretending that they are not there, or denying their influence, but by representing a different set of values and prerogatives."[12] As we edge toward a new future and a new millennium, we must remember that the struggle for global change requires each of us to participate, including those with whom we disagree the most. After all, few of us are true heroes or true villains. We are simply people with a whole lot of different concerns, who want to live and create some meaning in our lives—and in the process, hopefully, to leave the

world a better place than we found when we arrived. That is the promise that we must fulfill, because otherwise we will perish. Are we ready to seize the new day?

Notes

1. The word "mission," so commonly used by development professionals, is revealing. It comes from the colonial days, when colonizers thought that the natives had to be convinced of their own ignorance and imbued with superior European Christian values and views.

2. See Stephen R. Shalom, "Gravy Train: Feeding the Pentagon by Feeding Somalia," *Z Magazine*, February 1993, 15-25.

3. R. Omaar, and A. de Woal, "Saving Somalia Without the Somalis," *Africa News*, 21 December 1992—5 January 1993, 4.

4. Ibid.

5. It is interesting to note that the pivotal role of African American churches and leaders in mobilizing support for Ethiopia was generally neglected in the media.

6. The following information is drawn from Peter J. Boyer, "Famine in Ethiopia: The TV Accident that Exploded," *Washington Journalism Review*, January 1985, 19-21. It is remarkable that even in this excellent piece, there is no mention of Mohammed Amin, Michael Buerk's African colleague, who was instrumental to this story being developed.

7. Ibid., 19.

8. Ibid., 19.

9. Ibid., 19.

10. Samir Amin, "Accumulation and Development: A Theoretical Model," in *Review of African Political Economy*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (1975): 9-26.

11. Jacques Attali, *Millennium: Winners and Losers in the Coming World Order* (New York: Times Books, 1991).

12. Edward W. Said, *Representations of the Intellectual* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1994).