



# The Reproach of Hunger: Food, Justice, and Money in the Twenty-First Century

By David Rieff

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Can we provide enough food for 9 billion (2 billion more than today) in 2050, especially the bottom poorest in the Global South? Some of the most brilliant scientists, world politicians, and aid and development persons forecast an end to the crisis of massive malnutrition in the next decades.

However, food rights campaigners (many associated with green parties in both the rich and poor world) and traditional farming advocates reject the intervention of technology, biotech solutions, and agribusiness. Many economists predict that with the right policies, poverty in Africa can end in twenty years. “Philanthrocapitalists” Bill Gates and Warren Buffett spend billions on technology to “solve” the problem, relying on technology.

Rieff, who has been studying and reporting on humanitarian aid and development for thirty years, puts the claims of both sides under a microscope and asks if any one of these efforts will solve the crisis. He cites climate change, unstable governments that receive aid, the cozy relationship between the philanthropic sector and agricultural giants like Monsanto and Syngenta, that are often glossed over.

*The Reproach of Hunger* is the only book to look at this debate refusing to take the cherished claims of either side at face value. Rieff answers a careful “yes” to this crucial challenge to humanity’s future. The answer to the central question is yes, if we don’t confuse our hopes with realities and good intentions with capacities.

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### Editorial Review

#### Review

“[Rieff’s] unflinching analysis is an invaluable corrective to the happy-clappy unreality of much of our current thinking on hunger. A forceful critique of the ideology that has captured many transnational institutions in recent decades, *The Reproach of Hunger* is a substantial work of political thought.” (John Gray *NewStatesman*)

“As refugee crises fill the news, David Rieff reminds that hunger is a war not won. Rieff, a veteran thinker on development issues, spent six years researching the nexus of population, food commodification and persistent poverty for this critical analysis. Scathing about the alarmist or over-optimistic pronouncements of development officials, agribusiness multinationals and philanthropic nabobs, he notes that any issue involving billions of humans cannot be neatly engineered. Thoughtful, trenchant and bracingly sceptical.” (*Nature*)

“An erudite and well-researched analysis of the problem of world hunger and the challenges associated with international development. . . . [the book] exposes the contradictions of the philanthrocapitalist dogma currently in vogue and challenges readers to reexamine the causes of growing development inequality among countries.” (*Philanthropy News Digest*)

"Hunger, [Rieff] writes, is a political problem, and fighting it means rejecting the fashionable consensus that only the private sector can act efficiently." (*The New Yorker*)

“A stinging indictment of modern philanthropy and development theory’s capacity to resolve the pressing issues of poverty and hunger. In the wake of so many books rehashing the same arguments about how to help the developing world, readers will be grateful for a different (and impeccably researched) perspective. This is a stellar addition to the canon of development policy literature.” (*Publishers Weekly* (starred review))

“Will we be able to feed the nine billion people expected to populate the world by 2050? Scientists, politicians, and economists, backed by abundantly wealthy philanthropists like Bill Gates, say yes. Advocates of food rights and traditional farming counter that the biotech and agribusiness means suggested are deeply flawed. With 30 years' worth of studying humanitarian aid and development behind him, Rieff listens to both sides and comes out with a qualified yes.” (*Library Journal*, *prepub alert*)

“A realistic examination of the world's ability to solve the global food crisis.” (*Library Journal*, *review*)

### Praise for *A Bed for the Night: Humanitarianism in Crisis*

“A withering, thought-provoking study.”—*The Wall Street Journal*

“Hardheaded, sophisticated, and urgent.”—*The New York Times Book Review*

### Praise for *Slaughterhouse: Bosnia and the Failure of the West*

“Rieff writes with a knowledge so thorough, an intelligence so keen, a passion so scalding, and a morality so

vigorous, that one cannot come away from reading this without despair for mankind.”—*The Advocate*

“It is David Rieff’s shocking conclusion . . . that we have reached the point where to bear witness is the remaining alternative to losing hope in the face of unchecked crimes against humanity.”—*The Baltimore Sun*

### **Praise for *At the Point of a Gun: Democratic Dreams and Armed Intervention***

“Rieff’s lucid, fair-minded, and provocative essays should be mandatory reading for anybody who is trying to make sense out of our ever-more-troubling, post-September 11 world.”—*San Francisco Chronicle*

“Rejecting equally utopian humanitarianism and neoconservative ideology, Rieff’s collection of essays provides a compelling analysis of when military intervention is necessary and when it is doomed to fail.”—*George Soros* (\* \* \*)

#### About the Author

David Rieff is the author of eight previous books, including *Swimming in a Sea of Death*, *At the Point of a Gun: Democratic Dreams and Armed Intervention*; *A Bed for the Night: Humanitarianism in Crisis*; and *Slaughterhouse: Bosnia and the Failure of the West*. He lives in New York City.

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The Reproach of Hunger

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#### A Better World Finally within Reach?

In order to properly understand what the food crisis is, it is essential first to understand what it is not. Unfortunately, it often seems from their public statements as if officials charged with coping with the food crisis and developing plans for reforming global agriculture are as mystified as the general public. Instead of asking hard questions, these officials frequently seem content to fall back on pat answers and development boilerplate. A particularly egregious example of this occurred in April 2008, when Josette Sheeran, then executive director of the World Food Programme (WFP) and an official widely admired in the world of relief and development, described the global food crisis of the previous year as a “silent tsunami,” and declared that it presented the WFP with “the greatest challenge in its 45-year history.” Such over-the-top rhetoric, an amalgam of apocalyptic worst-case scenario building and shameless institutional self-aggrandizement, is not peculiar to responses to the global food crisis. To the contrary, it has been more often the rule than the exception in the development world at least since the days of Fritjof Nansen, whose pioneering efforts on behalf of refugees in the early twentieth century served as an inspiration for the current humanitarian relief system. In this sense, Sheeran’s statement was unremarkable, a standard-issue iteration not simply of the rhetorical but of the ideological furniture of relief and development work.

However they are communicated, whether in speeches by senior officials, in press conferences and briefing materials for the media, or on the organizations’ websites, such appeals almost invariably start with a lurid, oversimplified account of a particular crisis and end with a fund-raising pitch that usually either states or at the very least implies that if donors will just fork over, the agency in question is ready, willing, and able to save the day.

In fairness, Sheeran was only fulfilling one of the principal institutional demands that went with her job. Her predecessors were certainly no better. Four years earlier one of them, James Morris, had called the Asian

tsunami of December of 2004 “perhaps the worst natural disaster in history.” And in the immediate aftermath of the 2010 earthquake that devastated Port-au-Prince, Elizabeth Byrs, the spokeswoman for the UN Office of Humanitarian Assistance (OCHA), one of the WFP’s sister agencies, stated flatly that the UN had “never been confronted with such a disaster,” which she characterized as being “like no other.”

Morris’s claim was absurd—nonsense on stilts, to use Bentham’s inspired phrase. Only someone historically illiterate, or at least a person whose historical imagination did not reach much further back in time than 1961, when a UN General Assembly established his agency, could have seriously advanced such a claim, and it is of course entirely possible that Morris, who was a cultivated man, knew better but felt constrained (just as Sheeran may well have done) to adhere to the familiar script. But Byrs’s assertions were not much better. Was the Haitian earthquake truly a greater challenge and a more profound human tragedy than the refugee emergency that followed the Rwandan genocide of 1994 or the outbreaks of famine in North Korea in the 1990s—in both cases, human disasters that involved the relief and development arms of the United Nations? Perhaps a moral philosopher could have adjudicated the hierarchy of these horrors, but surely it was above the moral pay grade of an international civil servant such as Byrs, or Morris, or Sheeran (or, for that matter, of a writer like me). But even in the context of the shameless hyperbole that has been the common coin of humanitarian agencies since the refounding of modern humanitarian action that can be dated to the work of the so-called French Doctors in Biafra between 1967 and 1969, and the specific special pleading of WFP agency, Sheeran’s image of the global food crisis as a silent tsunami was particularly ill judged. It was not an assault of nature for which, at least in the case of earthquakes or tsunamis, it is possible to prepare but that human beings can do nothing to prevent. If anything, the food crisis is the diametrical opposite of a natural disaster such as a tsunami or an earthquake, and is instead the product of the current world system. In other words, it is the result of such things as the current relations of force between haves and have-nots, on how world markets work, on what technologies we use (and the moral and political assumptions behind those technologies)—when all is said and done, about what kind of world we want to live in, about the world order that now exists and the world order that might one day exist. There is nothing “natural” about it.

To posit matters in such starkly ideological terms is commonplace in the Global South. But it tends to disturb mainstream opinion in the Global North, where most economic and political power still resides, both on the center-right and on the center-left. There it has been widely assumed, and with increasingly hegemonic authority since the end of the Cold War, that throughout the world, enlightened people agree on how global society should be organized. It is a view championed first and foremost by the human rights movement, and it has percolated through global institutions, above all the UN system. It might have been thought that the rise of China would of itself serve to undermine such millenarian fantasies. For the moment, however, it has not. And yet it is the persistence of ideology that helps explain why, despite the “zero-sum game” quality of much of the debate that the global food crisis has engendered, intelligent people can disagree so comprehensively and passionately both about the causes of the price rises of 2007–2008 and about how, in its wake, the world’s food system can be successfully reformed or even almost entirely remade so that even if hunger persists, the number of hungry people begins finally to diminish.

If we do not agree on how societies should be ordered, we are unlikely to agree about how poverty can be alleviated and hundreds of millions of poor people can enjoy at least a measure of what development experts call food security. Is capitalism the answer or the root of the problem? Can there be nutritional transformation without political transformation? Are the challenges to the global food system analogous to an engineering problem that one can expect to be largely solved by technical innovation, scientific innovation, and of course money, accompanied by some lashings of “good governance” and “transparency” (to use two “default” expressions favored by those in the mainstream for whom the concept of ideology is an intellectual atavism that stubbornly and incomprehensibly refuses to sign on to the humane global consensus that democratic capitalism is asserted to be)? Or is greater social justice what matters most, and with it the

need to stop thinking of food as a commodity like any other and start thinking of it as a human right?

On the antiglobalization side of this “dialogue of the deaf,” as the French often call such mutual incomprehension, the conviction is strong that the food crisis is first and foremost the inevitable product of what one briefing paper from Food First, the think tank based in Oakland, California, that has produced much of the best analysis of the current global agriculture and broader food system from a radical perspective, describes as a “dangerous and unjust global system.”<sup>1</sup> Leave that system standing, this argument goes, and no matter how many reforms are put in place, the world will lurch from food crisis to food crisis, because, on this view, systematic injustice is the root cause of hunger, and the only steps that can ever make a lasting difference are those that lead to its removal—a transformation that, to be effective, could not be restricted to poor farmers and their families but would have to include all poor workers, rural and urban alike.

On the other side of the ideological divide, a consensus most powerfully articulated by the World Bank has developed around the view that the crisis had three central causes. The first was the insufficient global attention paid to agriculture during the three decades before the crisis. The second was the failure to increase the production of vegetable staples. And in diametrical opposition to the food rights campaigners’ claim that the dire situation of smallholder agriculture has been the inevitable result of the deepening of a global regime of free trade, the mainstream view is that on the contrary, the real problem was the failure to open markets completely during the 1980s and 1990s. This is despite the fact that this was the era of the so-called Structural Adjustment Program (SAP), a free-market economic prescription for developing countries whose adoption was a prerequisite for further loans or guarantees. But, unlike at the WFP, neither officials of the World Bank nor their food activist adversaries have ever suggested that the crisis of global agriculture was anything other than man-made. Indeed, in a number of interviews, Robert Zoellick, who became the World Bank’s president in 2007—after the brief and troubled tenure of Paul Wolfowitz, former US deputy secretary of defense in the George W. Bush administration—and served until the summer of 2012, was quite explicit. He flatly rejected the tsunami image outright, instead calling the global food crisis “a man-made catastrophe that must be fixed by people.”

The point would seem to be self-evident. That is what makes it so difficult to fathom why someone as knowledgeable as Josette Sheeran, whose tenure at the WFP has been viewed favorably even by a surprising number of the institution’s many critics on the left (this despite the fact that her political roots were in the American right, hardly a place where commitment to the UN system has ever been in ample supply), could think it appropriate to speak of a silent tsunami. And as if the natural disaster image was not bad enough, the image of a “silent” crisis was even more wildly off the mark. For if the global food crisis so quickly provoked, as it did, the extreme degree of alarm within an international policy elite that literally for decades was comfortable to the point of complacency in ignoring the predicament of agriculture in the poor world, it is precisely because the manifestations of the crisis have been so, well, noisy, which is to say, so potentially destabilizing to the status quo. Tsunamis or earthquakes provoke fear, but also a large measure of resignation, and appropriately so, since human beings have no means of preventing them, only of doing a better or worse job at rescue and at mitigating their long-term effects. It is only when the effectiveness of the emergency relief and subsequent development efforts is found wanting that the anger arises—again, appropriately so. In contrast, the anger that the global food crisis provoked among the poor of the Global South, who have been its principal victims, and activists north and south who support them, has had an entirely different quality to it.

It is probably the case that in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, what remains of the global left has a weakness for grasping at straws, too often seeing the constituent elements of a new global revolutionary moment in almost every eruption by an urban jacquerie—from the Los Angeles riots of 1992



to the London riots of 2011—as well as in various episodes of student wrath—from the student protest in France in 2005, through the student riots in Santiago de Chile in 2011 and 2013, and on to the so-called Occupy movement that began on Wall Street in the fall of 2011 and soon spread to many parts of the world before slowly fizzling out. In reality, though, none of these events ever posed a serious challenge to the global system as it is currently organized. In contrast, historically, time and time again food riots actually have been the catalyst for revolutions. It is a commonplace that a rise in the price of bread was at least as important a catalyst to the French Revolution as taxation or Enlightenment ideas. Less well known is the fact that the failed revolutions that broke out across much of Europe in 1848 followed hard on the heels of a series of lethal droughts that had provoked a significant number of food riots. And all but forgotten in twenty-first-century America were the widespread food protests by poor women in New York City almost one hundred years ago. These began in February 1917, lasted for almost two months, and quickly spread to Philadelphia and Boston. The parallels with the current global food crisis are startling. Just as in 2007–2008, the women were confronted not by food shortages but by food prices they simply could no longer afford. The protests centered on a successful mass boycott of the pushcart peddlers from whom the urban poor bought most of their staples, though at one point it also led to the storming, not of the Bastille this time, but of the Waldorf Astoria hotel.

Historically, it should come as no surprise that global food crises should have global political and social ramifications, perhaps most lastingly in the Islamic Middle East. For while it is important to avoid overstating the influence of the global food crisis on the genesis of the so-called Arab Spring, it is not unreasonable to assume that the further immiseration of the poor of the Maghreb that the events of 2007–2008 engendered played at least some role, even if they were secondary to other, largely more conventionally “political” and religious grievances and hopes. A comprehensive report by the US think tank the New England Complex Systems Institute would appear to demonstrate a correlation between sharp rises in food prices and social unrest. For example, it is true that the rioting that swept thirty countries in 2007–2008 virtually ceased once food prices had dropped to precrisis levels at the beginning of 2009. But they began to break out again in the Middle East at the end of 2010 and the beginning of 2011 as prices once more started to rise—in other words, at more or less the same time as street protests began in earnest first in Tunisia and then in Egypt.

It is impossible to prove this, of course, and, to paraphrase August Bebel on anti-Semitism, conspiracy theories are the political understandings of fools. Nevertheless, it hardly seems likely that the major rich-country governments and international and intergovernmental institutions that had been so passive (to put it charitably) in their previous responses to the problem of global hunger should have reacted as swiftly as they did in 2007 and 2008 had the dangers to the current global system of inaction not been apparent. After all, while it is true that that the price spike directly or indirectly caused at least one hundred million more people to go hungry (though neither of two familiar demographic responses—famine or a reduction in the birthrates of the affected populations—resulted), somewhere between eight hundred and nine hundred million people were already hungry when prices were lower, and it was broadly assumed that prices either would remain stable or continue to trend lower as they had done during the previous thirty years. What made the hunger of a billion or so people a crisis when the hunger of eight hundred million had been the factual backdrop for business as usual? It is not as if the major international donors, the World Bank, or the IMF had been in the dark about the prevalence of hunger and malnutrition before the 2007 crisis. To the contrary, international NGOs with a particular interest and expertise in food—notably Action Against Hunger, Concern Worldwide, Save the Children, and Oxfam—and a few Western governments—above all the Republic of Ireland because of the importance of the famine of 1847 in its history and in its collective memory, that is to say its constructed and politicized imaginative political geography—had been sounding the alarm for years. But while some initiatives were taken, they had never before succeeded in garnering the support needed from those institutions and governments to have any lasting effect at the macro level.

Again, why this was the case is anything but clear. A hundred years from now, it will probably seem incomprehensible that it took a radical rise in the price of food in the first decade of the twenty-first century for those who wield power and influence, in what we so self-regardingly and stipulatively persevere in calling the “international community,” to stop sweeping the broader crisis of global agriculture under the development carpet and finally start to think about it seriously after a more than a thirty-year hiatus. To say that it may be too late for the international food system to be reformed in such a way as to prevent it from lurching from crisis to crisis would be to give in to an unwarranted despair. Even if one is skeptical about the extent to which the governments of the major aid donors in the Global North and the World Bank and the IMF will follow through on the new commitments they have made, there are too many smart, committed, and influential people working diligently on rethinking global agriculture to condemn the enterprise to failure as of this writing. But by the same token, it would be foolish indeed to assume, just because these people have dedicated themselves to finding solutions, that these solutions are there for the finding. It is at least possible that like the rising tide of global migration from the poor to the rich world, the crisis of the world’s food system is unlikely ever to be “solved,” but, rather, the best that can be hoped for is that it will be managed intelligently. Given the many grave mistakes that have been made in the past, errors that are likely to haunt policy makers and activists alike for a long time to come, this would already represent considerable progress.

The political cliché that “a crisis properly made use of is an opportunity” would seem to describe establishment responses since 2007. These include a wide range of initiatives ranging from new seed technologies, through women’s rights (the majority of smallholder farmers are women, just as the majority of the poor are women: in that sense, women’s development is development), to a renewed emphasis on proper nutrition for pregnant women and children from gestation through the first one thousand days of life. And it is simply an empirically verifiable historical fact that hope can be a powerful catalyst for reform and for social transformation. But what is less often pointed out, in an age where hope and optimism are often presented as the only morally licit stance for any person of conscience and goodwill to take, is that hope can also be a denial of reality and “solutionism” a form of moral and ideological vanity. One does not have to go as far as Nietzsche and insist that “hope in reality is the worst of all evils, because it prolongs the torments of man.” But one reality that is not in question is the extent of the damage done to global agriculture, above all to smallholder farmers in the Global South, in the three decades before the 2007–2008 crisis. As the Filipino sociologist and food rights activist Walden Bello has put it—and it is a sentiment that many people who could not be further from sharing his political views about what measures need to be taken and what sort of society brought into being to avert disaster would endorse—whether this damage “can be undone in time to avert more catastrophic consequences than [the world] is now experiencing remains to be seen.” Of course, this should be obvious. If it is not, again it is because hope has become the default position of our age, and realism (never mind pessimism!) is now widely considered to be a moral solecism and almost a betrayal of what it should mean to be a compassionate human being.

But whether one looks at the ongoing crisis of the global food system from an optimistic perspective or a pessimistic one, food has increasingly become a Rorschach blot for humanity’s highest hopes and greatest fears. There is nothing surprising about this. Napoleon famously said that an army marches on its stomach, but in fact it is all of human civilization that does so. More than half a century of plenty in the rich world—a time when expenditures on food as a share of a family’s budget just kept diminishing and diminishing—and, over the past twenty years, the adoption of the opulent (and not particularly healthy) diet of the rich world by middle-income countries from China to South Africa allowed at least the privileged among us to lose sight of this. It could hardly be otherwise, since rising incomes invariably increase the demand not just for food and access to an improved diet but also for more expensive food, meat above all. The change in European and North American diets from the 1930s to the current day is one illustration of this. Another is the rapidly growing Chinese middle class, which passed in two generations from fearing famine to coping with obesity

and obesity-related ailments. And unless or until the prediction in Matthew 20:16 that “the last will be first, and the first will be last” actually comes to pass, it is the interests of these privileged groups that will determine the global agenda.

This is not to say that this agenda either was or is immovable. The world is full of cruelty, but there is a surprising amount of altruism around as well, whose power it would be a great mistake to underestimate. One may legitimately question the wisdom of their strategies, but whatever else can be said about the leaders of many countries in the Global North that give development aid, mainline development NGOs like Oxfam or World Vision, philanthropies like the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, and, somewhat surprisingly given its past history, the World Bank, their commitment to reducing poverty is genuine and deep. To lay my own cards on the table, the shift in the thinking at the World Bank that began when James Wolfensohn assumed the presidency of the institution in 1995, and which emphasized global poverty reduction or, to use the current term of art, “pro-poor growth” (rather than, as it had done previously, economic growth at virtually any cost, including the exacerbation of poverty) still seems to me to have been nowhere near sufficient. And every so often, one will be reminded that the “new World Bank,” with its shiny new slogan, “Working for a World Free of Poverty,” hasn’t moved quite as far as it claims to have done. For example, the maverick development economist William Easterly discovered in the course of writing his book *The Tyranny of Experts: Economists, Dictators, and the Forgotten Rights of the Poor* that officials of the bank are forbidden to use the word democracy because, by its charter, the bank can’t engage with politics (hence the weak replacement, “good governance”). But I see absolutely no basis for doubting Wolfensohn’s commitment or his sincerity, or that of his successors.

Similarly, for reasons that I will go on to lay out in some detail in this book, I have been and remain extremely critical of the Gates Foundation, both in terms of what I view as its excessive emphasis in its grant-making and lobbying and public relations activities on technology-based solutions to the global food crisis and the foundation’s increasing ability to dominate the debate and shape the policies of the UN system and major donor governments on agriculture. But whatever one’s differences with him, not only could Bill Gates have spent his money on other things than HIV/AIDS, education, and smallholder agriculture, but one only has to listen to him to understand his moral seriousness. And this is equally true of Melinda Gates, whose role in moving the foundation to concern itself with certain issues has been at least the equal of her husband’s.

Would it be a better world if the fate of hundreds of millions of smallholder farmers, especially in sub-Saharan Africa, did not depend so heavily on what are essentially decisions made unilaterally, and certainly with no democratic accountability whatsoever, by the richest couple in the world, whose foundation, as Bill Gates wrote unashamedly in his 2013 annual letter, “picks its own goals”? In my view, it would be a far better world. But given the reality of how decisions are made and power is exercised in the world as it actually exists in the early twenty-first century, would these smallholder farmers or, indeed, the rest of us be better off without the Gates Foundation? In my view, even though I do not subscribe to the idea that capitalism (and most especially either its American or East Asian variants) is the best form of social organization that we can aspire to, the answer is still, we would not. To appropriate Donald Rumsfeld’s admittedly self-exculpating but nonetheless unforgettable remark about the preparations or lack of them that the Pentagon made on the eve of the Second Gulf War, you fight hunger in the context of the economic system you have, not the one you wish you had.

In any case, the Gateses’ altruism, if that is indeed the right name for it, is anchored in the conviction that the world is witnessing what economists Abhijit Banerjee and Esther Duflo, using language far more modest than Gates’s, have called the “quiet revolution” of sustainable progress. Gates has said that with regard to most global problems, “time is on our side.”<sup>2</sup> But it is far from clear that he is right. For even if a consensus

could be reached over what changes needed to be made, they may prove to be so radical—a drastic restriction in the amount of meat that will be available for human beings to consume being an obvious example—that it will be politically and culturally impossible to achieve them. If that turns out to be the case, then, indeed, it is entirely possible that the Hobbesian dystopia of the war of all against all will prevail rather than the Kantian order of perpetual peace in a global commonwealth—the philosophical bedrock on which the UN system, the human rights movement, and the project of the Gates Foundation ultimately rest. But for all that is getting worse in the world—above all, climate change, which, if the pessimists are right, may render discussion of anything else moot<sup>3</sup>—humanity has scored some major victories as well. Probably the greatest of these have been the steady decline in interstate war and the taming of famine, without an understanding of which the nature, scope, and significance of the contemporary crisis of the global food system is extremely difficult to get right. In the main, my own views are pessimistic. But I not only accept, I insist that it is entirely possible that twenty years from now, it is the optimists who will have proven to be right. Caveat lector.

But while I believe that these dualities of optimism and pessimism need to be kept in mind, I also want to make it clear to the reader that I would not have written this book had I only aspired to play Cassandra, which is itself not the least culpable species of vainglory. Between 1992 and 2004, I worked as a kind of war correspondent, first in the Balkans, then in Rwanda and Congo, and finally in Israel-Palestine, Afghanistan, and Iraq. My “beat” was not these wars themselves, not the horrors of the front line, nor the political breakdown that had set the torch to the pyre, nor the politics that eventually brought peace or, if not peace, at least an open-ended silencing of the guns.

Instead, I mostly followed what we have all come, somewhat misleadingly, to call the “humanitarian” dimension of these conflicts. I spent my time in refugee camps, with the internally displaced, and with the UN agencies (above all, the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees [UNHCR]) and relief NGOs (above all the International Rescue Committee and Médecins Sans Frontières). At the time—particularly in the 1990s, before 9/11 put an end to the era in which the United States, France, and Britain could imagine that the principal role their militaries would play would be as global policemen, intervening, though only when they chose (Rwanda. Rwanda!), to prevent mass atrocities—these conflicts got far more attention in the media and, arguably, at times at least, in the UN system as well than all the ongoing efforts, whether they were effective or not, to alleviate the grinding poverty of so many hundreds of millions of people in countries and regions that were not at war. “If it bleeds, it leads,” and all that.

I do not presume to judge whether this was right or wrong. What I am certain of, though, is that despite the overthrow of the Gaddafi regime in Libya, uncertainty about the outcome in Sudan, the French intervention in Mali, ethnic cleansing and massacre in the Central African Republic, and the horrors of the Syrian Civil War, which grind on unstaunched as I write, the age of humanitarian war is largely over. The question is whether the end of poverty looms as well. When I first heard it suggested that the answer is “yes,” by a wide range of influential public figures ranging from pop stars such as Bob Geldof and Bono, by economists such as Jeffrey Sachs, and by a cohort of journalists and writers lauding the transformative power of what they called “philanthocapitalism,” I could not believe that they were serious. For me, the biblical insight that the poor would always be with us seemed a far more reliable true north. But I was quite wrong. As I would learn, and as I will go on to narrate in this book, Jeffrey Sachs’s conviction that it was perfectly feasible, as long as rich countries provided the money needed—money Sachs insists is trivial by the standards of the US military budget or even the bonus culture of Wall Street and the City—to end extreme poverty by 2025 had become the received wisdom of the entire development world.

Not everyone agrees. Some development skeptics, such as William Easterly and Dambisa Moyo, whose work is routinely dismissed as too “anti-aid” by the global food and development establishment (Gates has

attacked Moyo with an especially acrid vehemence), have argued that it is capitalism, and not official development aid or philanthropy, that will bring people out of poverty. At the same time, there are many people and organizations on the antiglobalization left who are firmly convinced that any major progress in poverty reduction, let alone the end of poverty itself, will be impossible to sustain as long as the current capitalist order prevails. Since the Gates Foundation is the product and in many ways the apotheosis of this order, they are simply skeptical of the idea that such institutions, and the governments with which they collaborate more and more closely, can be the source of the major changes that are needed. It is one thing for capitalists to be philanthropists, they say, but quite another to expect the Gateses and Buffetts of the world to commit class suicide.

When the global food crisis erupted in 2007, revealing the general crisis of the world's food system of which it was only a symptom, I imagined that those who were so confidently predicting that extreme poverty would soon be an artifact of the past would at least modify their views and ratchet down their expectations. But rather than ratchet down, they have doubled down. The UN and World Bank officials, the senior staff of the major development NGOs, and figures such as Bill and Melinda Gates and Bill Clinton continued to insist not only that progress has been made, which at least in some regions of the world is unquestionably true, but that this progress is for all intents and purposes unstoppable. This view is exemplified by Charles Kenny's *Getting Better*, the full title of which includes: *Why Global Development Is Succeeding—And How We Can Improve the World Even More*, a book that has been lavishly praised by Bill Gates. As far as Kenny was concerned, there was no doubt that the world was, as he put it, "winning the war on human suffering," and his view very much reflects the mainstream consensus. Writing to me in response to a question I posed to him on Twitter two years after his book was published, Kenny remarked that if anything, he felt he had not been optimistic enough, even though, to his great credit he conceded that there was some element of faith in his belief that the threat of global warming would be seriously addressed.

Assuming for the sake of argument that Kenny is correct about the present trends, even "impatient optimists" like himself and Bill Gates (the expression is also the name of the Gates Foundation's website) presumably would concede that the victory will be a Pyrrhic one unless the global food system—which, again, even the global food establishment acknowledges is largely broken—can be reconstructed in such a way that will provide food security to the almost one billion poor people in the world who have no such guarantee today. Gates knows this, of course, which is why he has committed so much of his foundation's resources to agriculture. An optimist he may be, but Gates is a sensible "poverty optimist" who understands as well or better than anyone that extreme poverty cannot be ended while hunger endures. And he may well be right. But what if the future doesn't cooperate?

My purpose in this book is precisely to try to understand why that might be the case, and if indeed this optimistic framing of the future by the mainstream of the development world is at least partly mistaken, what alternatives exist to their vision of what can and needs to be done? Is the program of militant peasant groups such as Via Campesina and, more broadly, of the antiglobalization movement, with its vision of supplanting the reigning capitalist system both in terms of production and consumption, a viable alternative? Or does the rights-based approach championed by Olivier de Schutter—the Belgian lawyer who is the UN's special rapporteur for food and whose most sophisticated and developed expression is to be found in the Right to Food movement in India, which insists on the universal legal obligation of governments to provide sufficient nourishing food for all—have the greatest potential for transforming what critics of the food establishment, and even at least some people within it, view as an increasingly dysfunctional global food system?

These two visions of what that system can and should be could scarcely stand further apart. To acknowledge this is not wholly to rule out the possibility of finding common ground. Indeed, unlike his predecessor, the Swiss politician and writer, Jean Ziegler, Olivier de Schutter made many attempts during his tenure as

special rapporteur to facilitate meetings between the two sides to precisely this end. At the same time, though during his tenure as special rapporteur de Schutter did not always make the point explicitly, his vision of the “transformative potential of the right to food” was a call for the radical transformation not just of the global food system but of the global order in its totality. “The normative content of the right to food,” he wrote, “can be summarized by reference to the requirements of availability, accessibility, adequacy, and sustainability, all of which must be built into legal entitlements and secured through accountability mechanisms.”<sup>4</sup> The difficulty with this, as de Schutter doubtless knew, was that norms are not realities, although the international human rights community often seems to prefer to act as if it believed otherwise. “All democratic revolutions begin with human rights,” de Schutter wrote.<sup>5</sup> Even if he was correct, this begged a question that while doubtless not popular at the UN Human Rights Council that had appointed him, was in reality the salient one: Was there any basis for thinking that the early twenty-first century was a revolutionary epoch, democratic or otherwise?

Supporters of current efforts at reform of the type that the Gates Foundation has played so central a role in promoting do not have this difficulty. To the contrary, for all its tragedies (which they of course acknowledge and lament) the past two centuries have been an era of unprecedented progress in science, in technology, and, as Jeffrey Sachs has put it, “in fulfilling human needs.”<sup>6</sup> That is why the mainstream view is that while reform is very much needed, in some areas even urgent, it makes no sense to repudiate a system that for two centuries has seen the continued upward trajectory of global living standards and the reduction of the proportion of poor people in the global population. And according to Sachs, Gates, and many other extremely intelligent, thoughtful defenders of reform but not revolution, the sunny uplands of a world free of extreme poverty are firmly in sight—no more than thirty years off, according to the World Bank’s president, Jim Yong Kim—and, if we all put our shoulders to wheel, could be within our grasp even sooner.

Where does this leave us? The antiglobalization movement slogan, which, it is worth noting, is a great deal more modest than Jeffrey Sachs’s “End of Poverty,” is “Another World Is Possible.” To which the most sensible if not the most inspiring reply is, “Yes, it is indeed possible. What it is not is likely.” But surely the activists are right about one thing: in the future, food and water shortages, whether they prove to be absolute or relative, and the political and social crises that will ensue from them are more likely than not to pull the world down into the bloody muck of a war of all against all unless some historic compromise, to use the term Italians once used for the bargain struck in the 1970s between their country’s Communist and Christian Democratic parties, can be found between the rich and poor worlds. At the time of this writing, it is obviously impossible to know in which direction things will go. It is very early innings yet, and I will certainly no longer be alive when the final outcome does become clear. If I had to bet, I would opt for the war of all against all, but it is only a bet. And it is one on the subject of which I very much hope Jeffrey Sachs, Bill and Melinda Gates, Hillary Clinton, Bono, and all those whose views are close to theirs are right and I am nonsensically wrong.

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