WN *Columns*

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What do you think?

Geoffrey Cannon

We have been warned. Five vortices. From left, the Biblical Flood (the waves); down to the depths of Dante's Hell; the reversed citadel at Sintra; pattern of flame; Hurricane Katrina over New Orleans

Juiz de Fora, Rio de Janeiro. Humans make patterns. We see what we sense or think is significant. But much of what we look at we don't see, because it is beyond our attention or consciousness. In this period of specialisation from which we need to emerge, most people attend to details. Few people see big pictures. An exception is Mike Davis, my seventh hero. He cannot be categorised. That is part of his point. A professor successively at various Californian universities, and a holder of a MacArthur 'genius' fellowship grant, he has also been a convenor of the New Left in the UK. His writing is consistently apocalyptic. He is constantly vindicated by unfolding events. Here I propose him as one of the guides we need in our times. Yes, he has a lot to say about food systems – as one aspect of life on earth.

Then I return to the theme of the value of life, following my original proposal a few columns ago that human life is not sacred. The prompt now, is events at home. These include the death of Kenai the cat, the arrival of Cristal the kitten, Gabriel my son breeding butterflies, and rituals of grief in societies where death is openly acknowledged and where all family members are likely to see bodies.

'Inequalities in health' strikes me as an odd concept. It is common sense that there always have been, are, and always will be, inequalities in health – and in all other aspects of life also. Surely what is meant is 'inequity', which is an ethical concept – inequalities that are unfair or unjust. By itself 'equality' is sort-of mathematical. So why do most people concerned with public health and public goods persist in using the term 'inequality'? Could 'inequalities in health' be a term originated in bad faith? But my item on Mike Davis takes up these pages, which will appear in the next *WN*.

Box 1

Who have eyes to see

We have been warned. Five more vortices. From left, the eye of a hurricane, US East Coast. El Niño, coast of Brazil. Aircraft turbulence. An ocean maelstrom. A tornado storm in the US

Every period of history is modern for those who are living in it. This may be the first age in which most people foolishly imagine that what is past is inferior. For us now, what is written in the Christian Bible and other texts before the age of science, is ancient history. We are inclined to read of the strange events that were seen as significant then, with a sense of having risen out of an age of superstition. Plagues of locusts! Rivers drying up! Darkness coming upon the earth! Great floods! Animals suddenly terrified! Signs and portents in the heavens! We tend to think of these as chance events, or invented stories, or delusions of hepped-up hermits, and at any rate as not significant.

We need to think again. People up to what is known in Europe as the Middle Ages lived without most of the technology we have now, but they were necessarily more observant than we usually are. They had to be. We need to think again about what 'natural' phenomena may mean. For example, we all know now that before a tsunami strikes, the ocean recedes, tethered animals scream, and free animals flee to high ground. We also know that the eruption of Thira (Santorini) in Biblical times around 1500 BCE, which destroyed the Minoan civilisation, caused great darkness and floods, and because of causing ecosystem mayhem may account for the plagues narrated in the book of Exodus.

As for signs and portents in the heavens, the ancients did not have telescopes, but they had sharp eyes to see clear skies, and they needed to predict what we now know as *El Niño* events, the meteorological causes of floods and aridity, and thus of all four Horseman of the Apocalypse – famine, war, conquest, death. At least some of the signs they divined did have real meaning. And what we can see if we look – as above – is vortices, which is to say, a spiralling down into the deadly 'eye' of great storms and maelstroms. Compare the tornado (above, right) with Botticelli's picture of Dante's Hell (previous page, second from left). It is the same shape.

We who are trained in 'Western' concepts tend to assume that structures made out of straight lines are rational and real, and that other shapes – as those found in nature – are random or chaotic and have no meaning. But the shapes of the centres of hurricanes, tornadoes and maelstroms are, as you can see, essentially the same. They are vortices, which have destroying force. The ancients may not have been able to see the shape of hurricanes, but tornadoes and maelstroms are visible as terrible phenomena.

So is the increase of hurricanes foretelling a general descent of humanity into disorder, chaos and eventual obliteration? Are they signs and portents of a great curse if not of Jahweh, then of Gaia? Or short of that, a final warning? Is it true to say that the more vortices there are to see, when we choose to look, the greater the trouble we are in as a species? This seems to be a good working hypothesis. In which case, we are back with the ancients, and it is all the better that we should be. The advice of seafaring folk, to keep a weather eye open, and then to act aptly, seems wise guidance in these times now.

Food and nutrition, health and well-being

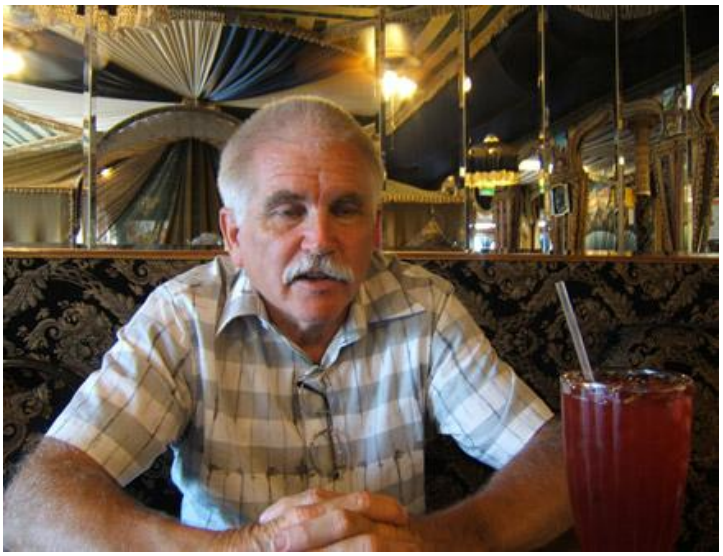
What they believe: 7. Mike Davis Apocalypse then and now

Access November 1998 LA Times Lewis MacAdams interview with Mike Davis here
Access February 2001 The Observer Martin Bright on Late Victorian Holocausts here
Access Nov 2001 Texas Observer Brant Bingamon on Late Victorian Holocausts here
Access October 2008 Tomgram Mike Davis on casino capitalism and Obama here
Access March 2009 Bill Moyers interview transcript with Mike Davis here
Access October 2009 Archinect Orhan Ayyuce interview with Mike Davis here
Access 2010 Minnesota Review Victor Cohen interview with Mike Davis here

Mike Davis pictured some time ago (above left) and recently (below right). Then, four of his books and their topics. Immiseration of India, China and Brazil by British and European imperialists. Billions of people living in shanty cities. US imperialism, climate change, meltdown of finance, outrageous inequities, exhaustion of resources. The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse ride again

For the 2005 Giessen workshop on the *New Nutrition Science* and the resulting issue of *Public Health Nutrition* (1), participants were invited to choose 15 documents that had most influenced them, and of these, a 'top 5' (2). Most of the 5 choices were books. Some were *The Geography of Hunger* by Josué de Castro (Hélène Delisle); *The Jungle* by Upton Sinclair (Tim Lang); *The Famine Business* by Colin Tudge (Claus Leitzmann); *Guns, Germs and Steel* by Jared Diamond (Tony McMichael); *How the Other Half Dies* by Susan George (Barrie Margetts); *The Wretched of the Earth* by Frantz Fanon (Barry Popkin); and *The Children of Santa Maria Cauqué* by Leonardo Mata (Ricardo Uauy).

These are all books on the social, economic, political or environmental determinants of disease, health and well-being. They all address the fundamental reasons why most of the world is impoverished while a minority lives in luxury. So does one of my choices: *Late Victorian Holocausts. El Niño Famines and the Making of the Third World*, by Mike Davis (above, upper row, book cover and one of the pictures it uses). A decade later I would make the same choice – as I do here, in recommending Mike Davis.



Lunch in the mirror room of the Ali Baba restaurant, El Cajon, recently settled by Chaldeans from Iraq, September 2009. Mike Davis is settling down to a lamb stew with innards and head meat

The information about *Mike Davis* here is taken from the interviews which you can access above. He is in his late 60s now. He is from Southern California, living near geological, ethnic and political fault-lines. He was brought up in El Cajon, then a working class town, close to the San Diego-Tijuana complex. As a young man he worked for his father as a meat cutter, then after dropping out of education was a trucker and union agitator. He started to write age 30. He was in the UK for most of the 1980s, joining the board of the *New Left Review*, and has written 15 or so books on the state and future of the US and the world now and in recent history. As you can see above, some of these have 'in your face' titles and presentation.

In 1998 he was given a MacArthur 'genius' fellowship grant of $US 315,000, which with his fifth wife Alessandra Moctezuma, he used to buy a house on the Hamakua coast of Hawai'i. Having already researched *Late Victorian Holocausts* for a year and a half, he wrote it within six months in Hawai'i. For the last 25 years or so he has been a lecturer then professor of various disciplines including architecture, urban geography and creative writing, at Californian universities.

Guidance in these times

If we cannot discern reality we are lost. In my considered opinion, Mike Davis is an essential guide for us to understand what is going on in the world now. We need to know what is happening, and why, as the only sure basis for reliable thought and action. Thus, the perennial crisis of food insecurity, deficiency and starvation in Asia and Africa can be addressed effectively only after the origins of immiseration in what has been termed 'the underdeveloped world' or 'the Third World' are understood – and also when we realise, as Mike Davis shows, that history is now repeating itself. Don't take my word for this! Below are two reviews of *Late Victorian Holocausts*.

Box 1

The making of the Third World

Extract from The Observer review by Martin Bright of Late Victorian Holocausts (3)

Driven to insurrection by the drought of 1877, the native Kanak people of New Caledonia rose against their French colonists in revolution. At a meeting with the French governor, the rebel leader Atai explained his people's grievances. He carried two sacks, the contents of which he emptied at the Frenchman's feet. The first contained soil. 'This,' said Atai, 'is what we had before you came.' The second contained pebbles. 'And this is what we have now.'

By June of 1878 Atai's rebellion was over after a policy of fire and murder had reduced hundreds of Kanak villages to ash. Atai was captured and decapitated by the French and his head sent back to Paris as a trophy of war. It is a grim irony that many of those who fought in the war of extermination against the Kanaks were French prisoners on New Caledonia, transported there from the revolutionary Paris Commune of 1871. But Louise Michel, the Red Virgin of Paris, took the Kanak side and even gave half her famous red scarf to two rebel friends. In her memoirs Michel wrote: 'The strength and longing of human hearts was shown once again, but the whites shot down the rebels as we were mowed down in front of Bastion 37 and on the plains of Satory. When they sent the head of Atai, I wondered who the real headhunters were; as Henri Rochefort had once written to me, "the Versailles government could give the natives lessons in cannibalism".'

Atai's demonstration before the French governor and Michel's colonial narrative both express the central argument of Mike Davis's book. He maintains that the droughts that struck across Asia, Africa, South America and the Pacific at the end of the nineteenth century were at best exacerbated by the colonial powers and at worst turned into vehicles of extermination by European governments blinded by the yoked ideologies of neo-Darwinism and free-market capitalism.

Since the French invasion of 1853 the indigenous Melanesians of the Pacific island of New Caledonia had been driven off the fertile land on the west coast into reserves in the mountainous interior. In a policy developed first in Algeria, the French replaced potentially troublesome local chiefs with pliant placemen loyal to the new regime. Within two years the French had thrown the Kanaks off 90 per cent of the best land and destroyed the tribal culture. The famine and its aftermath did the rest.

Late Victorian Holocausts is two great books in one. The first is a political history of the droughts and famines that killed tens of millions in the colonial world just as it was being wiped out in western Europe. The second is the scientific history of the phenomenon that became known as the *El Niño* Southern Oscillation: the cyclical pattern of extreme weather conditions that created the droughts in the first place. Davis draws together these meteorological and social phenomena to produce a picture of what he calls 'the malign interaction between climactic and economic processes'. Between 1876 and 1902 as many as 60 million people died as a result of famines in India, China and Brazil. The official examination of the causes of mass death in India by the Famine Commission of 1899-1902 found that it had been caused by high prices and not a shortage of food. In 1877, when millions died as a result of famine, a record amount of Indian grain was exported to Britain.

According to Davis, the Third World was created at this moment. *Late Victorian Holocausts* will redefine the way we think about the European colonial project. After reading this, I defy even the most ardent nationalist to feel proud of the so-called 'achievements' of empire.

To explain famine is to go a long way to explaining the enduring immiseration of so much of Asia and Africa. My own journey here began with Colin Tudge's first book *The Famine Business* (4). He quotes reports and other accounts written at the time and afterwards, stating that in the 17th and 18th centuries CE, India was at least as developed, civilised and prosperous as any European country. Thus in 1788 William Fullerton, a member of parliament who had been a general officer in the East India Company army of conquest, wrote (5):

> Such has been the restless energy of our misgovernment that within the short space of twenty years many parts of these countries have been reduced to the appearance of a desert. The fields are no longer cultivated… the husbandman is plundered, famine has been repeatedly endured, and depopulation has ensued.

A walk down Gower Street

Colin Tudge's book is quoted respectfully by Amartya Sen in his *Poverty and Famines* (6) which on a visit to London I found in Waterstone's bookshop by University College in Gower Street. In his later book *Development as Freedom* (7) Amartya Sen states rather carefully:

> It is certainly true that there has never been a famine in a functioning multiparty democracy.

In which case, what are the essential causes of famine – and in particular, the great famines that killed between 30 and 60 million people in India, China, elsewhere in Asia, Africa and Brazil, in the late 19th century? Musing on this, that afternoon I walked south to the other end of Gower Street, to Bloomsbury Street and the Socialist Workers' shop Bookmarks. Browsing, I found a book with the word 'famine' in its title. On the back cover was the statement that the book had won the US World History Association Award for 2002. It also carried a quote from Amartya Sen, who is well-known for praising other thinker and writers who are more radical that he chooses to be in public, being a Nobel prizewinner and for a time Master of Trinity College Cambridge. 'Davis has given us a book of substantial contemporary relevance as well as of great historical interest' he wrote, careful as ever.

For this of course was *Late Victorian Holocausts*. I showed the knowledgeable assistant at Bookmarks *Poverty and Famines,* and then Mike Davis's book, and asked him to compare them. His answer reminded me of the scene in *Crocodile Dundee* where our hero says to an assailant in New York, 'That's not a knife. This is a knife', and whips out his crocodile skinner, whereupon the hood flees in terror.

He was right. *Late Victorian Holocausts* eviscerates imperialism. After quoting *Inga Clendinnen* as stating that 'holocaust' applies to Hiroshima, Nagasaki and Dresden just as much as it does to the genocide of the Jewish people by the Hitler regime, Mike Davis states: 'It is the burden of this book to show that imperial policies towards starving 'subjects' were often the exact moral equivalents of bombs dropped from 18,000 feet'. Here follows a second review of his book, from the *Texas Observer*.

Box 2

The imperialism of 'free trade'

Extract from the Texas Observer review by Brant Bingamon of Late Victorian Holocausts (8)

In *Late Victorian Holocausts* Mike Davis narrates the relatively unknown story of massive recurrent famines in India, China, Indonesia, Africa, and Brazil in the years 1876 to 1901, and the roles played in these famines by weather patterns, imperialism, and free trade.

He redefines 'famine.' The lands he studies didn't experience food shortage simultaneously: 'Although crop failures and water shortages were of epic proportion…there were almost always grain surpluses elsewhere in the nation or empire that could have rescued drought victims. Absolute scarcity, except perhaps in Ethiopia in 1889, was never the issue.' The famines 'were not food shortages *per se'*. Prices shoot up, the poor can't afford to eat, and those with the money either help the starving, or make profits. The choice was profit. India and other countries exported food to England while their people starved to death.

With India 1876-1878 as an example, the colonial powers applied what Davis calls 'the imperialism of free trade'. They would not engage in any meaningful famine relief or even ease taxation. Sir Richard Temple, selected to administer relief in India, stated 'Everything must be subordinated … to disbursing the smallest sum of money consistent with the preservation of human life.' He reduced the daily allotment of food for those in relief camps, to amounts 'that eerily prefigured later Nazi research on minimal human subsistence diets.' The relief camps, 'fetid, disease-wracked boneyards,' killed the vast majority of those allowed to enter them. The Anti-Charitable Contributions Act of 1877 made private relief operations a jailable offence, because they interfered with the 'free market'. Throughout, big landowners continued to export the products of the vast monocultures that the British had set up, of grain, cotton, and opium, which had displaced traditional subsistence crops.

Davis details the concurrent famines in China, Brazil, Indonesia, and Africa. He estimates that 50 million of their peoples died from starvation and related diseases from 1876 to 1901. Contemporary records showed how famine breaks people down. This passage is from a westerner in China: 'Previously, people had restricted themselves to cannibalising the dead; now they are killing the living for food. The husband devours his wife, the parents eat their children or the children eat their parents: this is now the everyday news'.

The Third World was created in these times of drought and famine. Britain and other imperial powers ripped off the areas they controlled so thoroughly and ran them so negligently that their former subjects still haven't recovered today. 'When the *sans culottes* stormed the Bastille, the largest manufacturing districts in the world were still the Yangzi Delta and Bengal,' with other areas of China and India close behind. As late as 1850 'the average standard of living in Europe was a little bit lower than the rest of the world… From about 1780 or 1800 onward, every serious attempt by a non-Western society to develop its industry or to regulate its terms of trade was met by a military as well as an economic response from London or a competing imperial capital…. The Victorians resorted to gunboats on at least 75 occasions,' the most infamous being the Opium and Arrow Wars in which the English forced China to buy opium. 'Britain earned huge annual surpluses in her transactions with India and China.' Those surpluses, delaying the decline of English supremacy, drained the wealth of India and China and burned out their infrastructure.

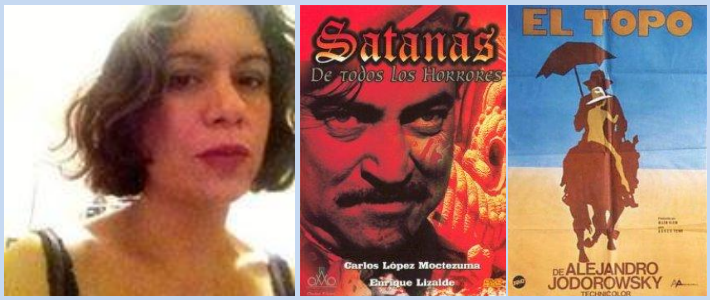
Davis is a master of synthesis. He answers the question of how Western Europe and specifically England, surged ahead of the rest of the world in the 19th century. His book goes far to show why the world looks the way it does today.

What history may tell

The point of his story, as often is the point of history, is that this is now happening all over again, and essentially for the same reasons. There are some differences. Aid to impoverished countries, a type of relief, is accepted by rich countries, although it amounts only to a fraction of what many of those countries pay out in interest on foreign debts. The situation of Iraq, Afghanistan and Palestine is more than one of famine, although it is that also. Another difference is climate. Mike Davis confirms that the *El Niño* Southern Oscillation caused the droughts in which famine could ensue. But in those days severe menacing climate was a natural phenomenon. Now this is caused also by human agency. On the next page is a recent statement by Mike Davis on the meaning and implications of climate change, which coupled with current 'free trade' is the third of three blows most of all to parts of the world already impoverished by imperialism:

Box 3

Mike Davis on the Moctezumas



This is taken from three of the interviews that can be accessed above. Mike Davis gives good interview because he loves telling stories. One critic says that he does not let the facts get in the way of a good story. However, truth is stranger than fiction. All the statements made below that can be checked are true, and the evidence amassed in his books has never been seriously challenged. But did he finally marry the legend…

I am married to Alessandra Moctezuma (above), and she has a very colourful genealogy, like a magical-realist novel, starting with a daughter of the ill-fated Aztec emperor. One of her great-uncles was Carlos López Moctezuma, (centre), the Jack Palance all-purpose bad guy of classical Mexican cinema. Another was known as 'El Tigre,' and helped suppress (in ways I am reluctant to discuss) the Cristero Rebellion in Jalisco in the late 1920s.

Her dad, Juan López Moctezuma, who for years broadcast the pioneering modern jazz programme on Mexican radio, was fascinated by Edgar Allan Poe and the gothic genre. He directed several now-cult horror films and co-produced Jodorowsky's movie *El Topo* (right). Alessandra is an artist and runs the art gallery at Mesa Community College. Border art and documentation of immigrant lives are recurrent motifs at her gallery.

Neither my wife nor I are good spies. We blurt out the goods at the first opportunity. We were once at the Alamo and one of the tour guides, a Daughter of the Texas Revolution, came up to us and said 'Welcome to the birthplace of Texas independence. Do you have any personal connection. And my wife says: 'Oh, I do. My great-great-grandfather General Juan Amador, ordered the execution of the survivors'.

Box 4

Mike Davis on climate change

Extracted from a blog posted by Mike Davis after election of Barack Obama as US president

An early hand-tinted photograph of the Grand Canyon. Awe-struck pictures like this stagger the imagination, as does our current view of seemingly synchronised global chaos and ruin

The first European to look into the depths of the Grand Canyon was the conquistador Garcia Lopez de Cardenas in 1540. He was horrified by the sight and quickly retreated from the South Rim. More than three centuries passed before Joseph Christmas Ives of the US. Army Corps led the second major expedition to the rim. Like Garcia Lopez, he recorded an 'awe that was almost painful to behold.' Ives's expedition included a well-known German artist, but his sketch of the Canyon was wildly distorted, almost hysterical.

The conquistadors and the Army engineers could not make sense of what they saw; they were simply overwhelmed by unexpected revelation. In a fundamental sense, they were blind because they lacked the concepts necessary to organize a coherent vision of an utterly new landscape. Accurate portrayal of the Canyon only arrived a generation later when the Colorado River became the obsession of the one-armed Civil War hero John Wesley Powell and his teams of geologists and artists. They were like Victorian astronauts reconnoitring another planet. It took years of brilliant fieldwork to construct a conceptual framework for taking in the canyon and for raw perception to be transformed into consistent vision.

The result of their work, *The Tertiary History of the Grand Canyon District*, published in 1882, is illustrated by masterpieces of draftsmanship that, as Powell's biographer Wallace Stegner once pointed out, 'are more accurate than any photograph.' That is because they reproduce details of stratigraphy usually obscured in camera images. When we visit one of the famous viewpoints today, most of us are oblivious to how profoundly our eyes have been trained by these iconic images.

Like the Grand Canyon's first explorers, we are looking into an unprecedented abyss of economic and social turmoil that confounds our previous perceptions of historical risk. Our vertigo is intensified by our ignorance of the depth of the crisis or any sense of how far we might ultimately fall.

If our world is to have a future in which our grandchildren, and those of our fellows in impoverished nations, can lead different lives, we now need guidance. This will not come from specialists or technicians, vital though details will always be. Nor will it come from elected leaders whose only real experience of life is being a politician. Nor will it come from anybody mired in the myth of money. Our guides now are those who understand poverty and war, chaos and danger, love and hope, from their own personal lived experience. They are those who have read, thought, spoken and acted widely and wisely. They are those who have dreamed dreams and seen visions.

Mike Davis is one of the people now alive and active who is all of these things. As his books indicate, he has much else to say, on the state of cities, outrageous inequity, what is wrong and what is real, and on how a sane world could come about. People like this simply need to be recognised for what they are. He is also an example. There are others, and some are already in high places. As a friend said to me the other day, let us hope that Pope Francis I does not have a sudden inexplicable fatal heart attack.

Box 5

Selected books by Mike Davis

Prisoners of the American Dream (1986). *City of Quartz: Excavating the Future in Los Angeles* (1990, Isaac Deutscher Award). *The Ecology of Fear: Los Angeles and the Imagination of Disaster* (1998). *Casino Zombies: True Stories from the Neon West* (1999). *Magical Urbanism: Latinos Reinvent the US Big City* (2000). *Late Victorian Holocausts: El Nino Famines and the Making of the Third World* (2000, American Historical Association Award). *The Grit Beneath the Glitter: Stories from the Real Las Vegas* (co-editor, 2001). *Dead Cities and Other Tales* (2002). *The Monster at our Door: The Global Threat of Avian Flu* (2005). *Planet of Slums: Urban Involution and the Informal Working Class* (2006). *Governments of the Poor: Politics and Survival in the Global Slum* (co-author, 2007). *Buda's Wagon. A Brief History of the Car Bomb* (2007). *In Praise of Barbarians: Essays Against Empire* (2007). *Evil Paradises: Dreamworlds of Neoliberalism* (co-editor, 2007).

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2 Cannon G. Sources. *Public Health Nutrition* 2005, **8**, 6A, 800-804. *Access pdf here*

3 Bright M. From mud to pebbles. Review of *Late Victorian Holocausts. The Observer*, 11 February 2001. *Access pdf here*

4 Tudge C. *The Famine Business.* London: Penguin, 1977.

5 Fullarton W. *A View of the English Interests in India.* London: Cadell, 1788.

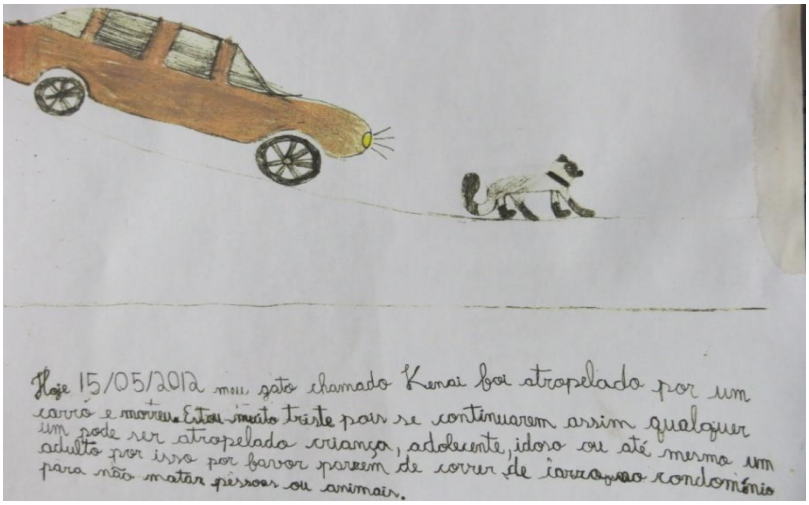
6 Sen A. *Poverty and Famines. An Essay on Entitlement and Deprivation.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981.

7 Sen A. *Development as Freedom.* New York: Random House, 1999.

8 Bingamon B. A hunger for imperialism. Review of *Late Victorian Holocausts. Texas Observer*, 23 November 2001. *Access pdf here*

Birth, life, death. What I believe: 11 (continued)
Human life is not sacred

Access January 2014 item on human life is not sacred here
Access February 2014 item on human life is not sacred here



'Today 15-05-2012 my cat named Kenai was hit by a car and died. I am very sad and want to say that children, old people or anybody could be hit and killed. Please drive slowly in this condominium so not to kill people or animals'. This is what our 8 year-old Gabriel wrote and sent two years ago

Now I return to my 'What I believe' series, and I am still ruminating about 'Human life is not sacred'. Colleagues and friends suggest that this belief has an affinity with 'All life is precious'. Yes it does, as sketched here, with a tentative conclusion.

Wild life

Our son Gabriel values all life, a reason being that our house is open to the natural world. Geckos live in my study here where I am now. A family of *gambás* (opossums) has been nesting under a bedroom roof, and it seems partying at night. *Marimbondas* (hornets) build nests high up in the downstairs rooms. Families of *micos* (small monkeys) and *quatis* (small anteaters) come from the forest next to our garden, wanting bananas. Gabriel and I breed *borboletas* (butterflies) from *lagartas* (caterpillars), and watch wild *abelhas* (bees) and leaf-cutter *formigas* (ants) build their homes.

We also have a couple of *gatos vira-latas* (mongrel cats), because cats should learn to live with one another. Two years ago we had Korda and Kenai, two as-if pure-bred Siamese. Then as you can see above, Kenai was killed by a car outside our house. Gabriel turned his *muito triste* (very sad) feelings into his appeal above to drivers, and we posted copies of his lament to everybody living in the 80-house condominium, and our neighbours still remember. 'Some have slowed down!' he exclaimed, of passing cars, in the first week. 'They have forgotten' he said gloomily, after that.

We breed borboletas (butterflies) from caterpillars rescued from birds in our garden. Here is one emerging from its chrysalis (left) and drying its wings and licking Gabriel's finger before flight

Here above is the most common butterfly in our garden. This is *Methona themista*, or *borboleta-do-manacá,* because its caterpillars feed on the leaves of the *Manacá cheiroso* bushes that my wife Raquel has planted in our garden, for their colours, their scents, and in memory of her beloved aunt Cely who had these bushes in her garden when Raquel was growing up. Yesterday as I write, we found a *borboleta-do-manacá* (not the one above) on an outside wall of our house and Gabriel edged it on to his finger, and it clung to him, as it did on my finger later. It did not drink the sugar water I gave it, and did not try to fly, and this morning it was on its side being breakfast for ants.

Tucanos (toucans) fly across the garden from time to time, always in pairs, and when our plum tree is full of fruit, it is dark with *jacu* (wild turkeys) that weigh down its branches and gorge. *Beija-flores* (humming birds) hover as they suck nectar. *Bougainvillea* grows like weeds. Trees and creepers writhe and thrive symbiotically. Big *largartas* (lizards) appear in our forest plot. They bite but are not venomous. *Cobras* (snakes) turn up occasionally. Some are very venomous, as are some spiders.

Now I would be bereft in a tamed country like England where I lived until 1999. These creatures are not pets, meaning animals dependent on humans. Dogs are, but cats are not, though sometimes Korda follows me around when he and I are alone in the house and is affectionate when he doesn't want food. What I have learned is what Gabriel knows in his blood and bones, which is respect for animals and insects and other living things, and the sense of community between them and us humans.

Then there are bacteria. The 'war on bugs' arising from military interpretation of Louis Pasteur's germ theory of disease, is a catastrophe. We and bacteria are evolved symbiotically. Some are dangerous, or can be, and all the more so because of gross overuse and abuse of antibiotics. But any attempt to sanitise ourselves and our surroundings, with those poisons that 'kill all germs, dead' is as idiotic as taking a flamethrower to our gardens because there may be snakes in the grass. It is also disrespectful, an insult to the general principle of life on earth, which is always to live and let live. This principle also implies to live and let die, and I am coming to that.

Cristal our new as-if Persian cat, the new companion for Korda, and the chrysalis of another borboleta-do-manacá inside a bedroom window, the day before the butterfly emerged and flew free

After Kenai was killed we got another *vira-lata*, the off-white Safira. She was wild and dominated Korda. She got pregnant at six months, and had five black kittens which I helped to birth, blind tiny things that all died from her neglect. Party girl, I thought, she will come to no good, and a couple of months ago she ran into the street and was killed. So now we have Cristal, an as-if Persian, extremely cute (see above) and also bold – hearing her panic mewing at dawn this morning I took a room apart and eventually saw her up at the ceiling, having climbed a bamboo structure. Korda is jealous, so he is getting family-sized love, sitting on my lap as I type.

Houses in the tropics with verandahs and windows opening onto gardens have no hard line between inside and outside. Three days ago Raquel found a chrysalis (above right) on the inside fastening of a shuttered bedroom window. The next day just before midnight the butterfly, another *borboleta-do-manacá,* had emerged, waiting for its wings to dry. When it was ready I cupped it in my hands, went out to the *Manacá cheiroso* bushes outside under the window, and it flew towards the forest. *Boa sorte*! I called out. Good luck, little creature!

Human life

It was a Brazilian woman who taught me about the value of human life when I lived in London. Maria looked through all the pictures I had neatly organised and filed of my mother and father and his mother and father, and of me when a child, and she made me little shrines of some of these pictures. Here they are now in my study, my mother and father whose marriage was wrecked by World War II, even some of them together, framed and in boxes together with mementoes, and also one of my grandfather and his two medals all private soldiers got after surviving World War I. In bringing them to light they are brought to life.

When I came to live in Brazil I discovered that it is normal to display pictures of relatives who have died at home. Traditional graveyards, where bodies are buried or else deposited in stone chests of drawers above ground, usually include pictures of the people who have died, as well as or instead of inscriptions. This blurs perception of the division between life and death, as do other customs here, in ways that I now feel are salutary and profound.

Raquel's aunt Hebe as a young woman being modern and independent, posed in a boat and by a plane, and with friends in the big city of Rio; and Raquel's cousin Berto, who also died last year

Here are pictures of two of Raquel's family, who died last year, displayed here at home. Aunt Hebe was brave and became an independent woman. She was active until her late 80s, then became fragile and, refusing surgery, chose when to die. The death of cousin Berto, an architect who also mentored Raquel, was a shock. Age 66 he was full of energy and enthusiasm. But soon after an all-clear routine check-up, he felt tired for a week and died in a day, we think from haemorrhagic dengue fever.

While I don't see them now, I think about Hebe and Berto as much now as I did when they were alive. Here is my suggestion. The notion that human life is sacred, manifest in the belief that people must be made and kept alive at almost all costs, is an artefact of a culture where life and death has became a mystery, with physicians as the divine intercessors, and where after death people are invisible. The more we value life of all living things, the less we are inclined to imagine that humans are divine. This has implications for public health teaching and practice. To be continued…

Status

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