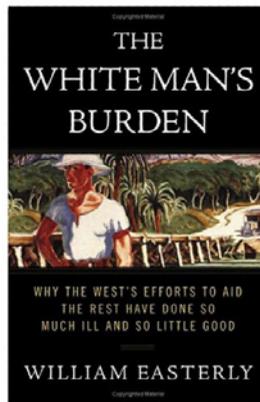


# Ironic title not ironic enough

Scott Hargreaves reviews

*The White Man's Burden: Why the West's Efforts to Aid the Rest Have Done So Much Ill and So Little Good*

by William Easterly  
(Penguin, 2006, 448 pages)



Africa is a mess. To fix it, the Sachs/Bono approach seeks more aid. Easterly believes World Bank/IMF policies contributed to Africa's ruination and, therefore, a reform of their policies would help.

I believe that Africa's salvation lies in Africa itself—not inside the U.S. Congress or the corridors of the World Bank. And its salvation lies in returning to and building upon its own indigenous institutions....

When you are the new kid on the block, the swiftest and surest way of making a name for yourself is to pick a fight with whoever is the current king of the heap. If the competition is to see who knows the most about directing foreign aid, and your name is William Easterly, you pick a fight with Jeffrey Sachs.

Professor Jeffrey Sachs, Director of the Earth Institute at Columbia University and special adviser to the UN on the 'Millennium Development' project, provides the intellectual grunt behind pop-star Bono's more charismatic efforts to 'Make Poverty History'. Sachs is the only academic on *Time* magazine's list of the world's most influential people.

Easterly, on the other hand, toiled for years as a research economist for the World Bank, and sought to reach out to a wider audience during the 1990s with a series of articles in *Foreign Policy* critically examining US and 'western' foreign aid.

While Sachs and Bono focused on African poverty and called for a massive increase in foreign aid, Easterly was trying to point out the incredible record of failure arising from the pro-

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grammes already in place. While Tony Blair and Gordon Brown played to the 'Make Poverty History' crowd, Easterly was pointing out the absurdity of perpetuating a cycle of debt forgiveness for recidivist defaulters.

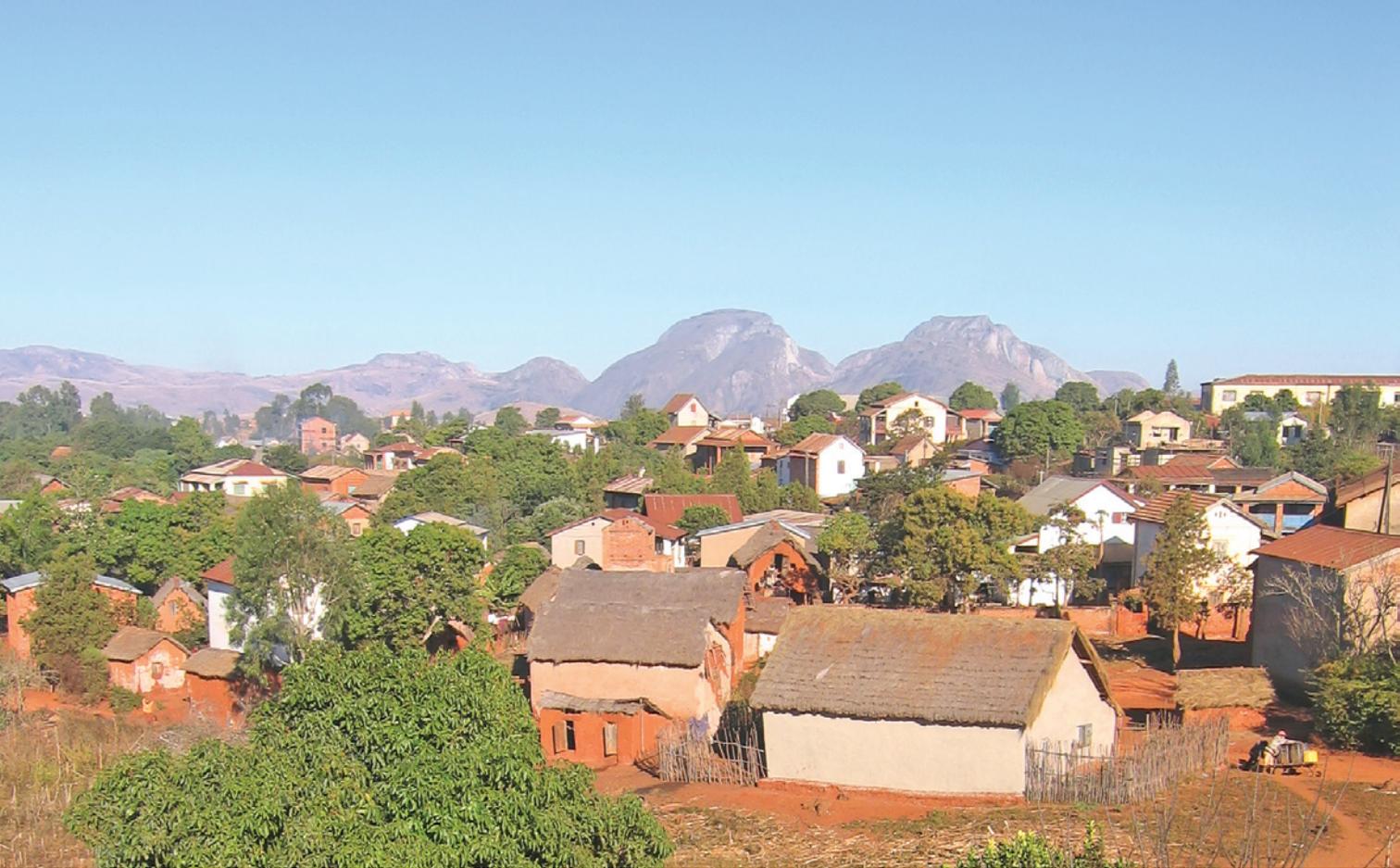
This dispute did serve to open up the field for public debate, but the focus on the protagonists took attention away from other voices, such as Dr George Ayittey, a prominent Ghanaian economist and President of the Free Africa Foundation. He told this reviewer:

Easterly's 'Us and Them' style determines the structure of the book, describing aid providers and recipients as either Planners (bad) or Searchers (good). 'Planners determine what to supply; Searchers find out what is in demand', Easterly said.

Planners, such as Sachs, are those who prefer grandiose plans such as the UN's Millennium Development goals, which set elaborate goals for poverty reduction and health improvements around the world by 2015. Providing voluminous (and damning) evidence, Easterly shows that it is precisely this kind of 'big push' that is most likely to fail.

There are so many parties involved in such utopian programmes that no-one need take responsibility and there is no accountability for failure. Easterly approvingly quotes Edmund Burke's caution against revolutionary utopianism, and sees himself very much at one with the 'Searchers'. While the Planners dominate the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF), Searchers tend to work on the ground. In the case studies of AIDS-prevention programmes or infrastructure projects, searchers seek to understand the local cultures, establish direct incentives for good behaviours, and achieve remarkable results.

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Magalasy village, Ambalavao, Madagascar

Easterly is frustrated with the outcomes of the recent focus on culture as a driver of economic development. While any supporter of economic and political freedom would agree on the importance of supportive cultural institutions—democracy, property rights, the rule of law, civility, etc.—in the hands of Western Planners what often occurs is the forced transplantation of Western institutions into very different societies. A true Burkean would not look at the *outcomes* of 500 years of Western societal development and then transplant them into the very different context of Africa. For Easterly, as for Burke, the evolutionary *process* is just as important.

As a good research economist, Easterly wants more reliance placed on measurable outcomes and accountability. But this is where the artificiality of the supposed conflict between Easterly and Sachs becomes clearer. Amartya Sen, Nobel prize winning economist, has rightly pointed out that for all

Easterly's 'purple prose', his objectives, if not his methods, are not so different from those of Sachs:

in Easterly's rejection of plans to aid developing countries, there is nothing of the false ethics that finds frequent expression in the anti-aid attitudes of those who argue ... the affluent have no moral responsibility to help the wretched

A truly radical view would come from someone like Dr Ayittey, quoted earlier, who went on to say:

Africa doesn't need aid. The aid resources it desperately needs can be found in Africa itself because its begging bowl leaks horribly.

Perhaps inevitably, given the gravitational force of power and money, Dr Ayittey's think-tank is nevertheless based in Washington, DC.

Easterly criticises the neo-colonialism of Western aid agencies, and the not so 'neo' imperialism of American foreign policy, but seems unable to imagine a world in which Western aid agencies are not somehow prime movers in creating economic development in recipient countries. The supposedly ironic tone of the book's title—*The White Man's Burden*—comes back to haunt the author.

*George Ayittey's book, Africa Unchained: The Blueprint for Africa's Future, was published in 2004 by Palgrave Macmillan.*

**IPA**