

Prostituting Charity: The Oxfam Debate

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Global Research, February 28, 2018

Region: [Europe](#), [Latin America & Caribbean](#)

Theme: [Law and Justice](#), [Police State & Civil Rights](#)

Featured image: Roland van Hauwermeiren

Oxfam has outdone itself. In the murky, squalid business where charity seems to chase, then embed itself in disaster zones like a dedicated virus, Oxfam ranks highly. In terms of a tally, the number of reported abuses in the charity sector is galloping ahead, with one of Britain's most noted charities in the lead.

The revelations this month that the charity's staff sexually exploited victims of the Haiti earthquake in 2010, a point subsequently concealed, have triggered a storm of British discontent. The revelations included a very active country director, **Roland van Hauwermeiren**, who revelled in sex parties as he went about his humanitarian work. Allegations of sexual abuse in Oxfam shops have also made their searing mark.

The organisation has lost over [7,000 donors](#) since the revelations, and MPs on the international development committee overseeing aid have been unimpressed. The Charity Commission may well have been misled by former executives **Dame Barbara Stocking** and **Penny Lawrence**.

Oxfam's CEO, **Mark Goldring**, is all apologies, notably after remarking in [an interview](#) with *The Guardian* that the charity was being attacked as if "we murdered babies in their cots. Certainly, the scale and the intensity of the attacks feel out of proportion to the level of culpability. I struggle to understand it."

The [official line](#) from the organisation was more humbling, though prefaced by an insistence that measures of reform had been implemented.

"It is clear we still have not done enough to change our own culture and to create the strongest possible policies to protect people we work with globally. We are doing that right now. But we must do much more and act with greater urgency."

On the other side of the moral saviour is the self-helping abuser. Such figures have needs and callings. The squalid reality soon manifests. Vulnerability is less there to be alleviated than cultivated, teased into an ongoing relationship between the victim and the touted rescuer. Historically, however, the mission of rescue can be broadly seen as part of the stock idea of the civilising project. The modern humanitarian project is a colonialism of the emotions, pornogrified guilt that finds refuge in despair.

It is precisely such a civilising mission that was said to cause debility and emotional decay.

The obligated civilisers, in engaging their burdensome task, would encounter harsh environments, uncompromising geography and problematic natives.

It was precisely such background that provided the alibi and apologia for the white civilizer's bad behaviour read against noble necessity. Geographer **Ellsworth Huntington** suggested in [Civilization and Climate \(1915\)](#) that temperate zones engendered mental stimulation while tropical climates induced "tropical inertia".

The focus of such geographers and the odd enthused quack was an insistence on justifiable degeneracy as an occupational hazard. "Tropical neurasthenia" was one term coined by **Charles Woodruff** in his 1905 work [The Effects of Tropical Light on White Men](#), emphasising the preponderance of insanity amongst certain US soldiers based in the Philippines. (Those based in cooler regions evinced fewer problems.)

"According to the man's complexion and general resistance to this exhaustion from increased metabolism and effects of the light may be so slight as to show mere enervation, or nervous weakness being more marked in older men."

Such studies served to bolster the views of **Benjamin Kidd**, a British sociologist who insisted that peoples from temperate zones could never adjust to tropical climes.

Taking such factors into account, and the modern, heart bleeding charity worker becomes a colonial builder. Such a figure is part of the modern industry of rescue, dressed up as a charitable exercise. According to **Afua Hirsch**, theories such as tropical neurasthenia may well have fallen out after the Second World War,

"but to this day our understanding of countries that receive humanitarian assistance is still deeply grounded in the same colonial thinking."

Even those considered voraciously read and enlightened on the problems of empire find room, even if small, to defend such missions. Poverty and disaster invite assumptions.

"I do wonder how hard it must be to sustain 'civilised' values in a disaster zone," pondered Cambridge classicist **Mary Beard**. That statement, it should be added, followed on from, "Of course one can't condone the (alleged) behaviour of Oxfam staff in Haiti or elsewhere."

The Beard episode induced outrage. Language police duly considered her use of inverted commas of civilisation as unwarranted and misguided. Others chose to avoid seeing them. Torrential abuse followed.

Fellow Cambridge academic **Priyamvada Gopal** finessed a particularly brutal response, reflecting on her own place of employment. Cambridge, that abode "where there is little direct abuse but plenty of genteel and patrician casual racism passing as frank and well-meaning observations." Beard had done nothing to show contrition, indeed persisted in refusing "to see what was so profoundly and deeply wrong" with such claims, supplemented by "bizarre, indeed cringe-making comparisons between the French resistance and aid workers."

Beard felt, a point she subsequently made in a blog for the [Times Literary Supplement](#), she had been “guilty of a shorthand which misled.” She duly concluded that it was “too easy to imagine that we are better than those who do the work we would be too scared to do.” The implication of such a sentiment, framed as an obligatory task of the nobly decent, is clear: even those involved in rescue and inadvertent civilising are humans too. Patrician morality is alive and kicking.

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