

# Reviews

## *Progressive Foreign Policy*

Edited by David Held and David Mepham

IPPR/POLITY, 2007

## *Global Politics After 9/11: The Democratiya Interviews*

Edited by Alan Johnson

DEMOCRATIYA/FOREIGN POLICY CENTRE, 2008

Reviewed by Faizal Farook

When Nick Cohen told us what he thought was wrong with mainstream liberal thought in *What's Left?* (Fourth Estate, 2007), a range of voices from across the political spectrum spoke up in vociferous agreement. The ensuing debate made it clear that the invasion of Iraq, despite its disastrous progress, was, far from an indictment of the right, instead a hammer blow that shattered the left.

Faced with a questionable, unilateral, pre-emptive military action, many found themselves locked into simplistic solipsism casting America and Britain as the bad guys, and therefore viewing their enemies' enemies as its heroes. Thus charges *Global Politics After 9/11*: the left abandoned those it should have been supporting (democrats, trade unionists and human rights activists) and supported those it should have been opposing (reactionary fundamentalists, terror groups and totalitarian Islamists). The message of the essays in both *Global Politics After 9/11* and *Progressive Foreign Policy* is clear: the left must recommit itself to the global promotion of human rights and democracy as universal liberal values.

Both books put forward strong but nuanced arguments to establish their starting point of a rejection of political relativism and the advocacy of universal liberal principles. David Mepham's essay in *Progressive Foreign Policy* warns progressives against being disorientated by George Bush's universalistic rhetoric. He chides cultural relativists who see democracy and human rights as neo-colonialism, and established thinkers who have argued that the concepts of rights are inapplicable to non-western societies. Such a position, he argues, rests on a view of cultural tradition as static and unchallengeable, ignores the role of non-westerners in shaping rights dialogue and overlooks the fluidity, diversity and multiplicity within all societies, especially in a global era.

As told to *Democratiya*, the core of American conservative Jean Bethke Elshtain's thesis on 'just war' echoes this idea, resting on the principle of 'equal regard': by consid-

ering all humans as of equal value we have a moral duty to consider whether we need to intervene. Elshtain outlines a pragmatic basis for deciding whether it is practical to intervene after considering whether there is a moral basis for doing so. Her warnings, however, against impatience, naive idealism and a reluctance to incur military casualties suggest that 'just war' may not be a viable strategy in a risk-averse, post-modern cultural climate.

Whilst the focus of the *Democratiya* interviews is largely the ethics of military intervention, *Progressive Foreign Policy* takes a wider view of ethical intervention, arguing that any UK-based foreign policy must be grounded in a holistic security policy that embraces 'soft power' as well as 'hard power'; instabilities and threats must be tackled using multidimensional policy responses not just force. Whilst Kevin Watkins and Nick Mabey advocate the role of development and environmental sustainability, Mary Kaldor takes this in a more interesting direction. She highlights the emergence of a global civil society unbounded by territorial borders, which she sees as the 'bottom-up' basis for governance by consent and examines how governments can bring together and promote public interest groups abroad.

Where both collections begin to diverge is over the question of whether any interventionist approach should be unilateral or multilateral. *Progressive Foreign Policy* argues strongly that British and American policy should be embedded firmly in multilateralism. Charles Grant argues for a strengthened EU Common Foreign and Security Policy, even suggesting the revival of the foreign policy provisions of the ill-fated EU constitutional treaty. Taking a wider approach, Ngaire Woods sees the crucial factor as reform of international economic institutions, arguing that their lack of representative legitimacy also impedes their effectiveness.

David Held contends that multilateralism is in trouble and the failing global agenda set by the Washington Security doctrine and Washington Consensus needs to be countered by a strengthened UN Security Council and the creation of a parallel Social and Economic Security Council and World Environmental Organisation. Such an approach is anathema to the engaging neo-conservative Joshua Muravchik, interviewed by *Democratiya*, who whilst embracing the UN as a forum for discussion, dismisses it as a platform for action, arguing instead that international law will need to be enforced by an internationalist US, the only remaining superpower.

Following through on its argument for international solidarity, *Global Politics after 9/11* features interviews from leading progressive thinkers in the Middle East: Ladan Boroumand, Saad Eddin Ibrahim and Kanan Mayika. All three view the role of the US in the Middle East as positive and progressive, even though their opinions of the Iraqi intervention differ, explaining that the Arab street is largely pro-Western. They make compelling arguments against conflating Islamist movements with the will of the people, though Ibrahim also makes a compelling argument for the co-option of Islamists into democratic frameworks where possible. What is clear from their analysis, however, is the enduring power of ideas and ideology in mobilisation, which serves as a powerful reminder to the British left in a period where it seems undecided on what it stands for, both domestically and internationally.

As one would expect of the calibre of contributors (many featured in both), both collections offer valuable contributions to recalibrating the left's international perspective. For those looking for a detailed academic exposition of a holistic progressive approach, *Progressive Foreign Policy* presents a thorough, comprehensive and well thought out

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argument. On the other hand, the *Democratiya* interviews adopt more of a 'salon' approach, and thus is by far the most provocative and engaging of the two collections. Whilst its range is narrower than the ippr volume, its focus on the moral and ethical dimensions of foreign affairs makes it accessible and eminently readable, as well as containing a range of arguments and counter-arguments from across the political and geographical spectrum. Readers looking for a good ideological dust-up, one sorely missing from the current domestic political debate, will find plenty to invigorate and infuriate in *Democratiya's* excellent collection.

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## *Just Another Emperor? The Myths and Realities of Philanthrocapitalism*

Michael Edwards

DEMOS / THE YOUNG FOUNDATION, 2008

Reviewed by Beth Breeze

The question mark in the title of this book is rather redundant as the author harbours no real doubts that the hype concerning philanthrocapitalism is as unwarranted as the lavish praise for the emperor's non-existent new threads.

But, just as it was the swindling tailors, rather than the emperor himself, who persuaded the crowds to applaud their skills, so too it is arguable that any hype about new types of philanthropy has been whipped up by observers rather than rich donors themselves.

Edwards is extremely exercised by the claim that 'a new movement is afoot that promises to save the world', yet the only people who could be accused of making such an arrogant statement are the journalists Matthew Bishop and Michael Green whose book *Philanthrocapitalism: How the rich are trying to save the world* does at least contain the qualifier 'trying' to save.

So at the heart of Edwards' interesting, well-written and passionate argument is a straw man. Of course it would be presumptuous, over-blown and untrue to claim that business methods alone can save the world by creating large-scale social transformations – but who, apart from the critics, says it can?

Indeed, Edwards provides us with many examples of philanthrocapitalists who make far humbler claims. Melinda Gates acknowledges that 'we know we didn't invent philanthropy ... we have relied so much on those who came before us'. Ebay founder Pierre Omidyar concurs with Edward's arguments about the limits of using the business approach in civil society saying, 'I don't believe there is a for-profit answer to everything'. And Bill Clinton is quoted as suggesting this approach should be used only 'where it is appropriate'.

Perhaps this trio are the exception, and most American philanthrocapitalists do need to eat the slice of humble pie being served up by Edwards. But in the UK we are still in the phase of encouraging role models to put their heads above the philanthropic parapet, and should be in no rush to encourage a backlash.

In parts, Edwards' conviction in his own critique is in doubt, as he appears fully aware of the significant impacts made by the targets of his ire. In addition to citing the successes of micro-finance and the new green revolution, he notes: 'Given that someone dies from malaria every thirty seconds and that treated bed nets can be produced and distributed at very low costs, these investments are extremely important and there is every reason to think that business and markets can help bring them to fruition'.

The disjuncture between Edwards' scattergun assault on the motives and methods of modern donors and his cooler assessment of their many achievements, makes it appear that his true aim may be to 'enliven the debate', which he certainly accomplishes given the amount of discussion the book has generated. Yet this enlivening process involves overstating the case in slating the new rich and leaving no room for reconciliation between business and civil society values.

Much criticism that is ostensibly levelled at philanthropists (new, old, capitalist or otherwise) is, on closer examination, thinly veiled criticism of the possession of great wealth, not its distribution by whatever means. Edwards' attack on those adhering to a philosophy 'rooted in money and self interest' reveals more about his anti-rich prejudices than it does about the ability of people who have made money in business being able to turn it to some public good.

Indeed, it is this aspect of his argument that I found most puzzling. Firstly the suggestion that money earned in pursuit of capitalist values can only ever be part of the problem rather than the solution, is to cast doubt on the ability of anyone living, and earning a living, in free market societies to make charitable donations. Why should my tenner to Oxfam escape accusations of hypocrisy when, as a writer living in the UK, I clearly benefit from global inequalities?

Secondly, the chasm that Edwards sees between the values and actions of people leading civil society organisations and those leading businesses is depicted as unbridgeable, 'in markets, we are customers ... in civil society we are citizens'. But must people be either red-in-tooth-and-claw capitalists or cooperative participants in civil society? Our social roles are not like hats that we can wear only one at a time; people slip easily in and out of multiple roles every day. Businesspeople are also parents, opera appreciators, football fans, followers of religions and passionate about numerous causes.

In the same month this book was published, Bill Gates gave a talk at the University of Chicago in which he pointed out that 'malaria kills one million people a year; baldness hasn't killed anyone yet', so he asks why it is that 'less than ten percent of the money spent on curing baldness is spent on fighting malaria'. To refuse to countenance giving Gates credit because he made his money in Microsoft, is to undermine a powerful advocate for change, who has ideas and the money to make them happen.

This book is worth reading as an interesting provocation, and it does a service in bringing debates about philanthropy to wider attention, but it is ultimately a counsel of despair. It suggests that philanthropy must wait until after the revolution and in the meantime lets those with the most to give off the hook by convincing them they are

intractably part of the problem. Capitalism's dominance shows no signs of abating, so we can either bash those who succeed in this system or we can encourage and support them in making the most effective interventions in tackling social injustice.

Ultimately, Edwards' sizzle is worse than the bite of his argument. Not only does he conclude that 'Philanthrocapitalism offers one way of increasing the social value of the market'; he also volunteers that if he were invited to address a gathering of the donors he has sought to demonise, he would begin by thanking them and acknowledging that without their efforts, 'the world would be further from the commercial and technological advances required to cure malaria and get micro-credit to everyone who needs it'. Looks like Edwards can see the emperor's shiny new suit after all.

**Beth Breeze** is Publications Editor at Philanthropy UK. This book review first appeared in the June 2008 edition of the *Philanthropy UK Newsletter*, available at [www.philanthropyuk.org](http://www.philanthropyuk.org)

## *Chasing the Flame: Sergio Vieira de Mello and the Fight to Save the World*

Samantha Power

ALLEN LANE, 2007

Reviewed by Maria Neophytou

As an intern at the United Nations (UN) in New York in 2001, I remember well the current that seemed to run through the building as people breathlessly relayed the news that 'Sergio' would be arriving for a fleeting visit from the field. The High Commissioner was well known within diplomatic circles: it was said that he brushed his teeth with Italian mineral water, and was always immaculately groomed and meticulously prepared – whether trekking for days through the Cambodian jungle to meet with rebel leaders, or guiding a team through a three way battle zone in Kosovo.

Samantha Power describes this 'hallowed persona' as 'a cross between James Bond and Bobby Kennedy', one of the few charismatic stars of the UN, whose young staffers 'trailed around him around as if he were the Pied Piper'. Her engaging biography brings his dramatic story to a wider audience, giving his life, work and ideas the chance to gain the recognition and profile they would surely have achieved had he survived the terrorist attack on the UN mission in Iraq in 2003.

In Power's own words, it is a 'dual biography', of a fascinating man and the extraordinary times he lived through. Sergio Vieira de Mello 'moved with the headlines', somehow finding himself at the centre of the action of many of the defining global events of the post-war period. Clubbed by police when as a philosophy student at the Sorbonne in 1968 he took to the streets infused with 'the flame' of the book's title, he carried the scars and spirit

of '68 with him: first as the office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) took him to the frontlines of Bangladesh, Sudan, Cyprus, Mozambique, Lebanon, Vietnam, Cambodia, Bosnia and Rwanda; and then through his subsequent postings as Head of the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA); High Commissioner for Human Rights; and Special Representative of the Secretary General (SRSG) in Kosovo, East Timor and Iraq. This is truly a biography whereby the times made the man and the man in turn made the times.

And yet, even to portray the book as a dual biography is to do Power's five-hundred-page opus an injustice. The book essentially does five things. First and foremost, of course, it documents a life – a unique life story rich in experience and insight, which was so tragically cut short.

But secondly, it underlines the importance, for all its faults, of the UN. This is as much the UN's life story as it is Vieira de Mello's. Intending to pursue philosophy, 'to be both a man and think everywhere and always', Vieira de Mello joined the UN more by chance than by choice. His first posting amidst the refugee crisis of newly formed Bangladesh convinced him that philosophy found its true application and affirmation in real world events, and he 'committed the UN's Charter provisions to memory with the same zeal with which he had once memorised the teachings of Karl Marx'. Even as the UN struggled to reconcile conflicting imperatives of upholding the Charter and doing the bidding of an often divided and self interested Security Council, and despite his own personal disappointments with the organisation, Vieira de Mello never doubted its capacity to do good.

Power in turn makes a strong argument for the indispensability of the UN, but she does not sugar-coat her subject. Vieira de Mello and the UN are evoked with all their flaws and grave mistakes, but Power does not let us lose sight of how tortuous decision-making in the urgency of the field can be, as heart rending choices between stability and justice, human rights and peace must be weighed up. The picture of a UN patriot emerges, so much so that Vieira De Mello's colleagues commented that at times, 'it was as if the UN Charter was speaking through a person'. When Vieira de Mello is crushed by the rubble of the first ever terrorist attack against the UN in Iraq, his body is found lying on a portion of the UN flag. It is clear that part of Power's intention for the book is to ensure that the flag does not get buried with him.

Thirdly, the book sheds light on some of the defining conflicts of the post-war period and the nature of the international system which frames them. Vieira de Mello tried to capture the lessons learned from his experiences in places like Cambodia, Bosnia, and East Timor but his attempts to stimulate reform by highlighting past failings often got lost in the bureaucracy and inertia of the UN system. For scholars and practitioners of conflict resolution, peace-keeping and peace-building, the book has abundant teachings and deserves a prominent place on academic reading lists and foreign ministry bookshelves alike.

Fourthly, the book provides a critique, however subtle, of US foreign policy. It is hard to untangle the fate of the UN from the policies of the US, not only on the Security Council but as an actor in the conflicts and events described. Part III of *Chasing the Flame* is devoted mainly to Iraq. Even with so much already meticulously documented by a bounty of scholars, Commissions and Inquiries, documentary makers and journalists, about what went wrong, these chapters make for compelling reading.

Power tells the story from the UN's perspective, and even with everything that we now

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know about the multitude of mistakes made by the occupying forces, the colossal folly of some of the US's actions and its frightening naiveté about the post-conflict space is astonishing. In Vieira de Mello, the Coalition had at its disposal someone, who as the UN administrator of post-conflict East Timor, had valuable experience assembling the apparatus of statehood from the rubble of war – yet his pleadings and offers of advice fell on deaf ears.

Vieira de Mello had his detractors when he insisted on engaging the likes of the Khmer Rouge or the Serb war criminals in an attempt to ensure that peace held, but this pragmatism found an unfortunate vindication in Iraq. US indignation at the Ba'athists trumped any consideration as to how a post-conflict Iraq could function, and so a decision was taken to dismiss all Ba'athists, even the mid-level officials who kept the wheels of state running, and national guard and police who upheld basic security, despite there being no one in place to resume their roles. Incredulously, 'the Ministries that kept Iraqi garbage collected, buses running and electricity in tact were now run by American and British citizens who neither spoke Arabic or had ever managed such tasks in the US or the UK'. The doors were left wide open for spoilers to wreak havoc, from indigenous insurgents to an opportunistic Al Qaeda, leaving a plethora of 'what ifs' in their wake – including the question of Vieira de Mello's own life.

Fifthly, and crucially, the book sketches out a set of principles drawn from all the above which can guide policy and action in the international arena. In the epilogue Power restates the urgency of UN reform, if we are to create an international guardian of the peace capable of dealing with the crises of the twenty first century. She also draws out five key lessons from Vieira de Mello's experiences: (1) performance-based legitimacy; (2) the need to engage spoilers; (3) security first; (4) the upholding of human dignity, both individual and collective; and finally (5) the necessity for humility in our interactions with other nations. We can already detect the influence of these principles in the foreign policy of Barack Obama, whose presidential campaign she served as an adviser. As this journal goes to press Power is part of Obama's transition team in the State Department.

So perhaps there is a sixth thing that book does: it establishes Power as an authoritative and vital voice in American foreign policy. For the role she has already played in shaping Obama's political thinking, and for any future role she may play in a possible Obama administration, there is reason to be hopeful that the tragedies documented in the book were not in vain. Power is the channel through which Vieira de Mello's vision lives on, and she has passed that flame on to Obama, who she characterises as 'the person whose rigour and compassion bear the closest resemblance to Sergio's that I have ever seen'.

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