

Worthy suggestions, doomed to be stillborn

Paul Collier, *Wars, Guns and Votes: Democracy in Dangerous Places*

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Although we live in a globalised world, it is a world of two halves, the haves and the have nots. Indeed, the have nots constitute the greater part of the world and their plight constitutes a threat to the stability of societies across the world. The gap between rich and poor is also growing. Paul Collier, an eminent development economist and a professor of economics at Oxford University, in his new book *Wars, Guns and Votes*, attempts to slice through the many ills which affect what he terms, the “bottom billion”, those societies and peoples at the foot of the social pyramid. He is an activist academic, suggesting solutions which will bridge this growing dichotomy between the rich nations and the bottom billion, so creating a more equal and stable world.

The subject is potentially rather dry and of little interest to most people in the developed world. Much of the academic research on which this book is based is also buried in journal articles, only read by a few diehards. This is the trouble with much academic writing: do ordinary people bother to read it? Indeed could they understand it if they read it? There is a tendency within the academe to conduct a closed dialogue among a few specialists. Collier has, therefore, consciously written a very accessible book which cleanly dissects some rather obtuse debates. He writes colloquially, perhaps at times too colloquially for what is still an academic text. But his writing is clear and will appeal to the non-specialist. The evidence for this is that the book has been selling well in local bookshops. It is to be hoped that those in power will take time from their busy schedules to read *Wars, Guns and Votes*, and hopefully, to learn from it as well.

Wars, Guns and Votes ostensibly covers the global range of the bottom billion but the weight of the book falls on sub-Saharan Africa, which is Collier’s area of specialty. However, Collier does not define what he means by the bottom billion, and this could confuse the reader who is unfamiliar with his previous book, *The Bottom Billion*. In the appendix he lists the nations that form the bottom billion, although this appears to have some notable omissions: Swaziland, Sao Tome and Principe, Bangladesh, the Dominican Republic are some of the nations that spring to mind. Indeed, I find the list somewhat arbitrary and I would like to know the criteria which

determine inclusion in the bottom billion. At any rate, by far the majority of nations in the bottom billion, according to Collier, are in sub-Saharan Africa.

The culture of the gun bedevils the world's poorest societies, brutalising and impoverishing the people. There are many examples around the world and we have plenty of cases in Africa. Collier maintains that it is the bottom billion which settle their disputes through violence. To a large extent this is true but one must not ignore the military help provided by the rich nations. During the Cold War the United States and the Soviet Union did not directly clash but they fought their wars through proxies, supplying arms, advisers and, in many cases, troops. In the post-Cold War world only Western nations and realistically only the United States have been able to use force against other nations and there have been invasions of Iraq, Afghanistan and interventions in Somalia and Bosnia.

As Collier shows, much of the cost of an international war accrues after the war is over because governments continue to spend heavily on armaments so as to boost their positions. And this further impoverishes poor nations. International aid also tends to seep into military budgets and Collier has calculated that this seepage could be as high as 11 per cent (p 111). But high military spending also increases the risk of greater conflict and hence greater instability. It is a vicious cycle. With the collapse of the Soviet empire, high calibre weapons became much easier to obtain, often at good prices. The international arms industry is a by-word for corruption and this slots in with Collier's point that the nations of the bottom billion are inherently corrupt. This is true, but corruption is a double edged sword and if the arms industry was above board in all its deals then there would be no room for corruption. The same applies to any other industry; one might cite the oil industry as a prime example. Because it nets billions of petrodollars the industry seethes with corruption and little of this wealth filters down to ordinary people.¹ The contestation over oil has also led to violence, as in the Niger Delta.²

In Africa, easy access to weapons has impoverished a host of nations. Somalia is a failed state with a skeletal government unable to control the capital, Mogadishu, which is awash with rebels and weapons. The American experience in Mogadishu was seminal in discouraging active Western military intervention in Somalia. The Somalian coast is also a haven for pirates who operate brazenly in the belief that they are invincible. The Sudan is another region of bloody turmoil; Southern Sudan will hold a referendum in 2011 to decide whether it should secede from Sudan. But one must ask whether this option will be viable. For as Collier reminds us, the leadership of Southern Sudan live in Kenya, flying into the area when necessary. So the people, forgotten in the conflict, remain to scratch a living from barren ground. Completing this bleak picture is the genocide which has occurred in Darfur, a festering sore not yet healed.

Sudanese president, Omar al-Bashir was indicted for war crimes by the International Criminal Court (ICC) in March 2009 and the onus now rests on all signatories to the Convention on Human Rights to arrest him should he enter their territories. However, the African Union panel on Darfur, headed by former South

1 *The Star*, 29 September 2009

2 John Ghazvinian, *Untapped: The Scramble for Africa's Oil* (Harcourt, New York, 2007), chapter 1

African president, Thabo Mbeki, has reported with alternative solutions which it is hoped will bypass the ICC's indictment. The panel's report, for instance, suggests a revamped judiciary to try those guilty of atrocities and it recommends the establishment of a Truth, Justice and Reconciliation Commission which would begin the process of national healing.³

Before the Rwandan genocide, the Hutu regime of Juvenal Habyarimana was stockpiling weapons, and despite the fact that there were ominous signals that violence was brewing, weapons were easily obtainable.⁴ There is a flip side of course: rebels also have easy access to weapons. Paul Kagame was able to equip and lead a very efficient guerrilla movement, the Rwandan Patriotic Front, which overthrew the evil Hutu regime in Rwanda. However Kagame has since become one of Africa's strongmen because being a guerrilla leader has conferred upon him the birthright to rule. Another guerrilla leader who seems to have become president for life is Yoweri Museveni of Uganda. Museveni's case is an interesting one because he did not have access to large quantities of arms, nor to significant numbers of soldiers. His campaign against Ugandan president, Milton Obote was launched in February 1981 with an attack on the Kabamba military barracks outside Kampala. Museveni led 34 guerrillas, 27 of whom were armed.⁵

In one of the few factual errors in this book, Collier states that Museveni overthrew Idi Amin, whereas in fact it was Milton Obote. When Uganda became independent from Britain, Obote became its first president but he led the country into a morass of corruption and decay which paved the way for Amin's coup in January 1971. The rivers of blood which flowed through Amin's Uganda are well documented. "Dangerous countries make for dangerous regions", writes Collier (p 116). It was Tanzania which acted to overthrow Amin and restore Obote to power hoping that this would stabilise the region. One would have thought that Obote would have learnt some lessons from his earlier unpropitious time in office but old habits die hard and his second term in power was no better than his first.

So Obote laid the groundwork for Museveni and became one of Africa's forgotten and unlamented dictators. Museveni is also one of Africa's strongmen and he has made it clear that Africa is not yet ready for two-party democracy,⁶ an idea which ties in with Collier's own thinking. Certainly Uganda has prospered, under Museveni and it is stable with a large measure of freedom; the major blip being the brutal terrorism of the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA).⁷

Collier notes that ethnic diversity in the bottom billion hampers the smooth functioning of electoral politics. He demonstrates that voters will inevitably opt for their own ethnic grouping and he argues that this type of identity politics gives rise to extremism which is particularly costly for poor countries. But Collier's argument is

3 *The Star*, 29 October 2009

4 L R Melvern, *A People Betrayed: The Role of the West in Rwanda's Genocide* (Zed Books, London, 2000), chapter 3

5 Yoweri Kaguta Museveni, *Sowing the Mustard Seed: The Struggle for Freedom and Democracy in Uganda* (Macmillan, London, 1997), chapter 10

6 Museveni, *Sowing the Mustard Seed*, chapter 14

7 On the fascinating history of the LRA, see Heike Behrend, *Alice Lakwena and the Holy Spirits: War in Northern Uganda 198-97* (James Currey, Oxford, 1999)

contradictory. He seems to suggest that democracy is not a panacea for the ills of the bottom billion. But, on the other hand, democracy is necessary to break the grip of ethnicity. His research shows that ethnic diversity impedes economic growth by as much as 2 per cent in poor countries (p 61) and an autocratic leader will seek to promote his own ethnic group at the expense of others. As Collier puts it, “the cocktail that had produced Africa’s dysfunctional social choices” was caused by high ethnic diversity and severe political repression (p 64).

Political manipulation is, however, the stock in trade of most political actors, whether from Africa, the bottom billion or from the rich democracies. It could take the form of religious extremism, ethnic rivalry, class division or an appeal to nationalism. One needs to be cautious in signalling out ethnic diversity. In Rwanda, for instance, the division between Tutsi and Hutu is one of class, not ethnicity. The Tutsi was the ruling elite for centuries until the colonial powers inverted this for their own ends. This upset the structure of Rwandan society.⁸ Politics is about power and the lust to control the destinies of people: the use of the ethnic label is a means to power; in the same way former president of the United States, George W. Bush exploited the war on terror and people’s fears of the “other” to create a war psychosis, thus consolidating his own power. Afghanistan is an ethnically diverse society but the vicious conflict there today is not an ethnic one but a religious one.

In Kenya a disputed election led to the most egregious bloodletting. The trouble with Kenya, however, is not so much its ethnic diversity, as Collier suggests, but its modern history; it is a society ill at ease with itself. The Mau Mau war was fought between Kenyans and against the British. It was a very brutal affair and, contrary to popular mythology which sees the Mau Mau as the root of all evil, atrocities were committed by both sides. When Jomo Kenyatta became Kenya’s first president in May 1963 he closed the door on the memory of the Mau Mau and he suppressed all public comment about the sufferings that had taken place; but beneath the surface of Kenyan society the Mau Mau was openly talked about. What was needed was reconciliation and a general recognition that people had endured terrible suffering.⁹ What Kenya needs even today is a truth and reconciliation commission which would allow the country to mourn openly.

One of the key propositions in *Wars, Guns and Votes* is the usefulness of the coup in replacing corrupt and inefficient governments. But as Collier argues, this presupposes that the coup is carried out with noble intentions. However, most of the evidence does not support this. Initially, intentions might be noble but the strong taste of power has a hypnotic effect which often leads to a worse situation. And as Collier shows, the coup leaves a bleak political legacy: military spending escalates, corruption continues unabated and the risk of another coup or even civil war, greatly increases. In most cases the guard simply changes from a civilian elite inebriated with power to a military elite who will go down the same road. Nigeria aptly illustrates this point, although in recent years, civilian rule and democracy appear to have been consolidated in one of Africa’s most important countries.

8 Gerard Prunier, *The Rwanda Crisis: History of a Genocide* (Hurst, London, 1998), chapter 1

9 David Anderson, *Histories of the Hanged: Britain’s Dirty War in Kenya and the End of the Empire* (Weidenfeld & Nicolson, London, 2005), chapter 8

Zimbabwe offers a different perspective on the coup. Its president, Robert Mugabe has used horrendous violence to consolidate his power and he shows no sign of moving on. Zimbabwe has no tradition of military intervention in government so is unlikely to undergo a coup, but the military's closeness to the ruling party and the fact that the Zimbabwe African National Union-Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF) has so many skeletons in its cupboard¹⁰ will ensure that the civilian-military complex in Zimbabwe remains tight-knit. And the attempt at a unity government now appears to be floundering, frustrated by the political machinations and bad faith of the mandarins in ZANU-PF;¹¹ although in Zimbabwe events have been moving swiftly and it is possible that the unity government will be back on track before too long.¹²

Nor has the Southern African Development Community (SADC) shown much grit in dealing with the Zimbabwean imbroglio. The only country which wields real clout in the community is South Africa and the chemistry which existed between Mugabe and former president Thabo Mbeki meant that little concerted action against Zimbabwe would be taken. And yet in the end it was Mbeki who brokered the power sharing deal which led to the unity government. But this raises interesting issues about contemporary Africa which we need to consider in the light of Collier's view that there are too many unviable states in Africa. Collier argues for a compression of the number of states to a suggested figure of seven. His argument might be laudable but it is impractical and in the present circumstances, unworkable. There are too many political egos at stake and few political leaders who would put the concerns of the continent above their own.

South Africa is mentioned a handful of times in this book and Thabo Mbeki once. This raises a concern despite the fact that this book deals with the world's bottom billion. South Africa is in Africa but not of Africa. This attitude has deep roots both within South Africa and outside.¹³ For instance, Collier notes that "Kenya has long been considered the most advanced country of Africa" (p 202). Really? Is Kenya more advanced than South Africa? He also refers to Botswana as "Africa's most successful economy" (p 142). Indeed it is true that Botswana is a well managed nation but its economy is fairly basic, based as it is on diamonds, beef and tourism and it needs a lot more diversification. South Africa, on the other hand, has a complex economy which is by far the biggest in Africa; Johannesburg is in fact the third biggest economy in Africa.

Mbeki must be credited for his tireless efforts in promoting Africa internationally. The New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD) was largely his initiative and he pushed for the reconstituted African Union. These initiatives, however, have been disappointing and Mbeki is largely responsible for this. Good governance is a principle which underpins NEPAD but Mugabe's Zimbabwe, protected by Mbeki for so long, was the antithesis of good governance. And whilst the

10 See, for instance, *Gukurahundi in Zimbabwe: A Report on the Disturbances in Matabeleland and the Midlands 1980–1988*, repr (Jacana Media, Johannesburg, 2007)

11 *Mail & Guardian*, 30 October – 5 November, 2009

12 Eyewitness News, Radio 702, 2 November 2009

13 See, for example, Dennis Winchester-Gould and Cyril Wright (eds), *Young Giant of the Western World* (Giant Publications, Johannesburg, nd [1982]) This glossy and expensively produced publicity publication covers the entire range of South African achievements

African Union took a hard stance against coups, many of its political leaders were not democratically elected.

Indeed, the current chairman of the African Union, Muammar Gaddafi, is one of Africa's longest serving leaders, having come to power in a coup in September 1969 and ruled by the gun ever since. Gaddafi has pushed the idea of African union, no doubt with himself as Brother Leader no longer simply of Libya but of the vast continent of Africa. Such bloated egos cannot be taken seriously and will in fact undermine any idea of closer union. Would any South African be happy to be ruled by an eccentric tyrant from Libya?

So we cannot take Collier's argument at all seriously. He further makes the invidious comparison with the United States. But the point here is that the federation of American states could come about because the people were generally homogenous and they shared similar ideals and language. Even so the Americans fought a bitter civil war and in the twentieth century race continued to scar the American nation. A more fitting comparison, however, would be to compare the continent of America with the continent of Africa. It seems unlikely that Venezuela under the leadership of an increasingly autocratic and socialist Hugo Chavez would be prepared to throw in its lot with the United States.

The federation of American states certainly achieved the pooling of resources, as Collier notes. And this provided efficiencies of scale, accountability and security all necessary for development. African countries often shy away from co-operation because of mistrust and fear. This is ingrained and does impede growth but it is unclear how it will be overcome. Infrastructure spending is a major casualty in this atmosphere of hostility and affects tourism, trade and therefore economic development. Africa has superb tourist destinations and the potential for a boom in this sphere is absolutely enormous. How many people have visited Ethiopia's rock-hewn churches and marvelled at their unique icons? The paranoia of some states (Libya is an example) further hinders the development of a tourist market. Africa needs to diversify its economic activities and the tourist market needs to be developed. This would particularly boost the bottom billion; but in order to achieve this goal it is essential that tourists be provided with reasonable services.

Let us briefly consider one tourist market from the bottom billion. The island of Zanzibar draws most of its Gross Domestic Product from tourism. It offers deep sea diving, a rich history underpinned by the slave trade, well managed museums, good local tours and efficient tour companies. Old Town, with its narrow streets and chunky Arabic architecture has an air of romantic decadence. Zanzibar also offers the visitor superb restaurants and some good hotels. To stand in the large meeting place in the Africa Hotel and to see the sun slipping and splashing into the gold-washed ocean at the end of the day makes one's trip to this magical corner of Africa worthwhile. Sadly there is a negative side to visiting Zanzibar. The airport is bureaucratic, inefficient and plagued by petty theft. There are only two types of hotel: expensive and very basic. Infrastructure is extremely rudimentary. It would be unadvisable to need medical attention whilst there. And electricity is erratic and can be off for days at a time but in general there is power for at most six hours a day. The major hotels and restaurants all have their own generators.

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It is no wonder that South Africa, with its sound infrastructure and services and its open society, is the continent's leading tourist destination. And yet even in South Africa there is the capacity for a tourist boom which could well happen if the soccer world cup is a success. And although the Afro pessimists have constantly belittled South Africa's ability to host the world's biggest sporting event, there is every indication that this country will produce a spectacular World Cup; the only question really is whether the national soccer team will get beyond the first round.

Collier is not an Afro pessimist but nevertheless he believes that the West needs to intervene if need be to rescue Africa from self destructing. He notes that the only countries able to intervene are Britain, France and the United States. Yes, but intervention by these states has been mixed. France did send troops to Rwanda but failed to prevent the genocide there; on the other hand she intervened with relative success in Cote d'Ivoire. Britain also intervened successfully in Sierra Leone. However, Collier does not devote any attention to indigenous initiatives. And there have been a number which need to be noted. The AU has sent peacekeepers to Somalia and Darfur. To boost its potential in transporting heavy equipment South Africa entered a partnership with a number of European countries to build an Airbus transport plane, the A400M project.¹⁴ There have also been successful peace initiatives in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and also in Burundi.¹⁵

Africa, in a real sense, is on its own. It might receive outside aid but it will have to police its own borders. There are too many other international hot spots which will use the resources of Western nations: just to subdue Afghanistan will take generations. If history is anything to go by then the battle will not be won. Pakistan's battle with Taliban insurgents is another major battlefield. And so we could go on. Collier has perceptively identified many of the shortcomings in Africa; but his solutions, too centred on the West, need to be re-thought because they are largely impractical. "There are too many lions and foxes in the political world, but not enough people of compassion."¹⁶ And this is why Collier's worthy suggestions will be stillborn.

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