

# Greatest Good for the Greatest Number

*Philosopher Peter Singer will anger his traditional lefty fans with a clear-eyed account of the benefits of globalization.*

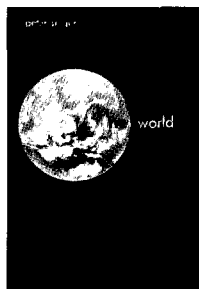
BY GREGG EASTERBROOK

**Y**ES, IT'S THAT PETER SINGER. THE one who has suggested that animals sometimes have the same rights as people, that the old should be euthanized to divert resources to the young (though he would spare his own infirm mother), that Americans should give away almost everything they possess to the developing world and live themselves like the developing world's poor (Singer donates to charity but he hasn't given almost everything away, as he advised others to do, and won't give to bums on the street). The Peter Singer who has said that utilitarian arguments can justify killing the innocent if benefits to others are large (a chilling thought, but also U.S. policy, as it is on utilitarian grounds that U.S. forces have killed some innocent people during the campaign against al-Qaeda in Afghanistan; presumably, Singer supports this). The Peter Singer who has suggested that severely handicapped infants should be killed for their own good (strangely, only people who were not born severely handicapped take this view), whom *The New Yorker* has called the

world's "most influential living philosopher" (which mainly tells us how little anyone cares about living philosophers, a state of affairs which the profession has largely brought on itself), and whose appointment to a chair at Princeton University aroused considerable alumni protests and the cancellation of some pledges. People have even protested the name of the chair he holds—Singer is now the Ira DeCamp Professor of Bioethics at the University Center for Human Values of Princeton. How can Singer have a chair at the University Center for Human Values, the line goes, when he is inhuman?

Yes, that Peter Singer. Since his views are much hashed over, it may be best to skip beyond his prior statements here, other than

to make two points. First, as I wrote in the previous paragraph, Singer has "suggested" most of his notorious positions. There is, in fact, an awful lot of high-class weasel-wording in his work, indicating either that he can't make up his mind or that he wants to have it both ways, grabbing attention by saying stark things, then indignantly claiming misquotation and pointing to some buried caveat when attacked. Second, when *The New Yorker* called him out on how he can say that other people's aging mothers should be put down like old horses but that his own should receive only the very best care in an expensive nursing home, Singer replied, "Perhaps it's more difficult than I thought before, because it is different when it



ONE WORLD:  
The Ethics of Globalization  
by Peter Singer  
Yale University Press, \$21.95

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is your mother.” So my grand pronouncements apply to everyone else but not me! There’s a word for this. And, as Peter Berkowitz has written, someone who presents himself to the world as an ethicist is supposed to have thought through the practical consequences of his ethics.

These points aside, *One World* is a pretty good book; if it did not come with Peter Singer baggage, I might say a darn good book. Singer, generally a hero to the loony left, struggles with the issues of globalization in a rigorously hard-headed manner rarely seen on this topic. Singer discards, or even shreds, much anti-globalization cant, focusing on which international economic policies will have the utilitarian outcome of raising living standards for the developing world’s poor. (Singer does not much care for the term utilitarianism, but it is the best shorthand for his value system, whose fine points cannot be fit into this space; broadly, he wants to raise the standards at which the human race lives as a whole to the highest aggregate level, which entails focusing upon the disadvantages of the developing world, and thinks our obligations to all members of genus *Homo* have about the same standing as obligations to our nation, to our ethnic group, and even our own children.) He proposes that formation of a “global ethical community” roughly along U. N. lines should be a sustained, long-term historic objective, but is realistic about the need to work within the existing framework of nations and borders pretty much indefinitely. And, crucially, he is not opposed to economic globalization. He asks the big question that anti-globalizers always dodge, namely: If we did away with globalization, would the poor of the developing world be better off? No, he answers, to do so would leave them worse off. This is the big point missing from the whole debate, and it’s impressive that Singer has locked on to it.

Let me offer against *One World* the objection analysts often make against sweeping arguments, that when the specifics enter some field that one knows personally, the author is off target. Singer devotes a chapter to the atmosphere, viewing pollution, especially greenhouse gases, as an incredibly horrible assault on the global commons. But he doesn’t understand the science well, saying, for example, “By spraying deodorant at your armpit in your New York apartment” you could be “killing people” by contributing to stratospheric ozone depletion. Not unless you were using a really old can of deodorant; CFCs, the ozone-depletion agent, have been banned in spray cans in the United States for 24 years (and banned in

all uses for about a decade). And though ozone depletion is real, there is no evidence it has ever harmed anyone, much less taken lives.

Similarly, Singer declares that while the prosperous G8 nations may be able to deal with global warming “without enormous loss of life,” the developing world will not. Yet global warming so far hasn’t harmed one single person. The mild temperature increases of the past century have coincided with an unprecedented global agricultural boom, staving off the predicted developing-world mass starvations and saving many tens of millions of lives. If global warming so far has been beneficial, there are good reasons to fear that future warming will not be. This is an argument for reform—and an argument why the oil-loving Bush administration is wrong to put off action against artificial greenhouse gases. There is also a strong argument that the United States, having emitted the largest share of greenhouse gases, has an obligation to bear the largest cost of reform. But only the over-the-top doomsday types project “enormous loss of life” from a future artificial greenhouse effect. No such forecast is found in the projections of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, the U.N. affiliate that is the source of global warming scientific consensus. Singer seems to feel he has to offer at least something to his fans on the loony left, and an overheated chapter about the atmosphere is what they get.

Once Singer gets to the economics of globalization, he is on surer footing. He notes, for example, that you can’t complain that nationalism is bad and then also complain that the World Trade Organization erodes national sovereignty. And he notes that the main effect of NAFTA, denounced by the anti-globalization left as a tool of corporate oligarchs, has been the creation of relatively high-paying jobs in Mexico. Half the point of NAFTA was to ship American jobs to Mexico, which is bad for American labor but great for Mexicans. “Any transfer of work from the United States to Mexico can be expected to raise the income of people who are, on average, much worse off than those U.S. workers who lose their jobs,” Singer writes. “Those who favor reducing poverty globally, rather than just in their own country, should see this as a good thing.” Indeed, NAFTA has always struck me as a huge gift from the people of the United States to the people of Mexico, if a gift that not all Americans wished to give. Why the globalization debate does not see it this way is hard to fathom, other than that, perhaps, it is simply taboo to say anything favorable about the current trends in free-market economics.

The analysis in *One World* is sharpest and newest where Singer takes on the endlessly repeated charge that the globalizing economy is increasing international inequality. Everyone from anti-globalizers to editorialists repeats this as a matter of cant, skipping the inconvenient data that show otherwise. Most factual claims of rising international inequality, Singer reports, are drawn from the 1999 edition of the United Nations Development Programme's Human Development Report, an indispensable reference whose latest edition sits on my desk. The 1999 Human Development Report included a statistical analysis which asserted that international inequality was increasing. The problem? That section contained numerous flaws and was essentially retracted by the 2001 Human Development Report. Those who delight in bad news cite the 1999 report without mentioning the 2001 retraction.

Most claims of disparate income are based on absolute dollars—that is, \$1,000 in one place versus \$100 in another. But buying power is what really matters. Even in the United States alone, \$100 in Ames, Iowa goes further than \$100 in New York City. Singer discusses the work of three Norwegian researchers who have applied buying-power indices to international income statistics, and found that from 1970 to 1997, as globalization was reaching around the world, international inequality steadily declined, if rather shallowly. (And the endless “widening gap between rich and poor” in the United States? This is an artifact of the huge rise in legal immigration in the last two decades. Factor out the low incomes of the newly arrived foreign-born, and the gap between rich and poor Americans is shrinking. But that’s a story for another day.)

Singer discusses the rarely commented-upon trend that most indicators, including standards-of-living, are positive in the developing world and have been positive throughout the period of rising globalization. Average incomes there almost doubled from 1975 to 1999; even if you subtract for oil-enriched developing nations with unusually high GDPs per capita, global average income rose. Global literacy is rising, and with it developing world levels of education and average developing world caloric intake. In 1975, one third of nations were holding true multiparty elections; today two-thirds do. Slightly over a

billion people still live on a dollar a day, a shocking figure that rises slightly every year. But it rises at less than the rate of global population growth, meaning the percentage of the world’s people living in destitution is ever declining. That incomes, education, and literacy could all rise globally during a period of population explosion is a tribute to the developing world itself—but then, it is also taboo to say anything favorable about developing nations. We are supposed

## **Singer asks the big question that anti-globalizers always dodge, namely: If we did away with globalization, would the poor of the developing world be better off?**

to pretend they know nothing but despair.

“What matters is people’s welfare, not the size of the gap between rich and poor,” Singer writes. And individual welfare is increasing in the developing world, though it still has a long way to go. Typical global welfare has increased under a regime of globalization. Maybe someday there will be a better system; market economics can’t possibly be the best humanity can do, it is just the best system available so far. But for all its many problems, globalization is mainly making most people better off. “Without globalization the rise in inequality would have been greater still,” believes Singer.

*One World* proceeds from there to argue that while it is reasonable for men and women to feel somewhat more responsible to family or community members, or to others of their own nation, than to the distant poor, no prosperous person can ever shed all obligations to the distant poor. This is a common-sense amendment of Singer’s previous suggestions that our neighbors and children should mean no more to us than the distant poor—which was a view with not the remotest practical chance of being adopted in the real world. From there, Singer argues not for the wild global redistribution schemes suggested by his previous writings but for big increases in foreign aid and the lowering of Western trade barriers so that developing world nations can expand their economies by selling to well-off nations which can afford to buy. Both are excellent ideas—and hint that this is an ethicist who may be learning to think through the practical consequences of his ethics. ●

# Aid and Comfort

*David Rieff's eloquent—but dated—meditations on the failure of humanitarian action.*

BY JACOB HEILBRUNN

**W**HILE THE WEST IS CURRENTLY fixated on whether and how to confront Saddam Hussein, several thousand miles away another military strongman is on the verge of

committing genocide. Zimbabwe's president-for-life, Robert Mugabe, has set out to create a famine in the mold of Stalin in the Ukraine and Mao in China. To buttress his sagging support in the country, Mugabe has uprooted thousands of white farmers, turning their estates over to militants and supporters—none of whom, it turns out, know how to farm them. The hundreds of thousands of blacks who *do* know how aren't being included in the reform; rather they, too, are targets of Mugabe's thugs and goons. And though the United Nations estimates that six to eight million Zimbabweans are at risk of starving to death, the only realistic way to avert disaster is to confront Mugabe directly, through stiff international sanctions and the threat of military intervention. But South Africa, which controls Zimbabwe's electric grid, banking system, and weapons supply, refuses to take action. And aside from voicing its concern and sending in diplomats to talk to Mugabe, the international community is doing nothing.

You can pretty much guess where this is heading. Millions of Zimbabweans will either die or wind up in refugee camps, where they will be cared for by an array of well-meaning humanitarian aid agencies, such as the Red Cross and CARE, none of them capable of pre-

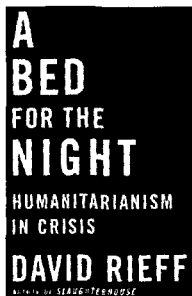
venting violence. The international community will feel ashamed at having allowed genocide to fall upon Africa yet again—having sworn “never again” after the Rwandan massacres of 1994—and will attempt to salve its conscience by generously funding the inevitable humanitarian efforts. And Mugabe, his political opponents conveniently stuck in refugee camps, will have achieved what he set out to do in the first place.

David Rieff is no stranger to such perversities. In the past decade, he has traveled to the most troubled regions of the globe, from the Balkans to Afghanistan. But the emotional pole-vaulting—landing in one zone of crisis only to leap off to the next—has left him with a nagging sense of guilt. And he is just as troubled about the ambiguous role that humanitarian institutions play in the world. Whether it's the work of Oxfam in Ethiopia in the mid-

1980s, which helped to prop up the murderous Mengistu government; or Médecins Sans Frontières, which was created to fight a genocide in Biafra that may not have been taking place; or humanitarian aid to Bosnia in the early 1990s, which became an alibi for the West's inaction, the record of humanitarianism is not as unblemished as it might seem. In his new book, *A Bed for the Night: Humanitarianism in Crisis*, Rieff wonders: When is intervention justified? To what extent are humanitarian agencies pawns of the governments they are trying to assist—or whose horrors they seek to minimize?

## Checkbook Interventionism

Rieff has produced something very far removed from the many arid studies of NGOs produced by industrious Ph.D. students over recent years. Elegiac in tone, *A Bed*



A BED FOR THE NIGHT: Humanitarianism in Crisis  
by David Rieff  
Simon & Schuster, \$26.00

JACOB HEILBRUNN is a member of the Los Angeles Times editorial board.