

A Game as Old as Empire

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Berrett Koehler (2007), 310pp., \$24.05.

In 2004 Berrett Koehler was the only publishing house willing to underwrite John Perkins' book 'Confessions of an Economic Hit Man', a major attack on the dark side of globalisation. Although it became a sensational best seller, Perkins' book was attacked by vested interests who challenged its evidence, demanding 'Where are the trenches? Can you produce the trowels that dug them?' This new book, which features an introduction by Perkins and involves specific evidence and contributions from a new wave of expert whistle-blowers, is a response to that challenge.

The title hints at the deep historic nets of corruption and power-broking involved in this 'game' that has shaped history, and which is embedded in human nature. The novelty the book highlights is the new global scale on which the 'game' is played, and the threat of a catastrophic schism between the rich and the poor which may result. Its underlying premise is that the developed world has mastered the means of plundering the developing world on a scale never previously achieved, and the agencies it uses are the World Bank, IMF and the international banking system. Globalisation drives the demand for imports from the Third World, and the resulting cashflows are redirected into imports of finished goods and sophisticated services, which are reinforced by loans made under pressure. The end result is a mountain of debt for Third World countries, whose servicing burdens the poor and enriches both corrupt local politicians and the institutions of the West. One of the most telling pointers is a World Bank balance sheet of twenty five years of development (1980-2005), showing how real average annual income in the 49 poorest countries increased by only 0.7%, compared with 1.9% in high income countries and 3.8% in India and 8.1% in China. The impact of aid, loans and debt relief is seen to be

marginal - the 0.7% figure is an average, including the rich citizens as well as the poorest.

'A Game as Old as Empire' has a devastating message which is driven home from many angles – setting the debt trap (World Bank), money laundering, institutional fraud (BCCI), resource exploitation, mercenaries, export credit agencies and the mirage of debt relief. There is more than a hint of hyperbole in some parts of the book (some episodes have a James Bond quality) yet the basic message is that the West (in particular, the USA) has created a web of control over the world economy which has been acting for many years as a Marshall Plan in reverse. The publication of the book and the growth of resistance against the excesses of globalisation among NGOs and 'people of conscience' are, perhaps, signs that this web of control may be broken over time.

'A Game as Old as Empire' is a fascinating read, and does not spare a host of well known names. I appreciated the inside stories of BCCI and off-shore banking from personal experience, and it was also interesting to know that Osama bin Laden learned how to manipulate fraudulent finance channels. I recommend it to all readers who are willing to be shocked but are also able to retain sufficient scepticism to keep the message in perspective. The Evil Empire is not a juggernaut – it is the latest manifestation of human greed and hypocrisy, and will need to be challenged by people of good will and courage.

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