

The Benefits of Famine: A Political Economy of Famine and Relief in Southwestern Sudan, 1983-1989 by David Keen. Oxford: James Currey Ltd., 2008. 237 pp. ISBN 978-1-84701-314-9.

In *The Benefits of Famine: A Political Economy of Famine and Relief in Southwestern Sudan 1983-89*, David Keen deconstructs the popular connotations of famine by incorporating the evolution of historical, economic, and political functions operating in the southwestern Sudan famine into existing academic research. In contrast to previous literature, which focuses primarily on market forces and conflict as ambivalent causal agents of famine, Keen introduces a comprehensive, multi-disciplinary analysis showing how interest groups manipulate these functions to create, promote, and benefit from the famine experienced by politically powerless groups. Keen's case study of Sudan illustrates these processes and serves as a medium for understanding these theories in other situations.

By setting the historical context and following trends over a 160-year period, Keen first argues that famines are not "isolated events that suddenly [take] hold" (p.18) but rather a culmination of decades of exploitative processes. Within this time frame, he demonstrates how the nineteenth-century famines caused by raiding and enslavement by the Turko-Egyptian and British colonial administrations created permanent economic and political functions favoring northern traders, and established an oscillating pendulum of marginalization between the Baggara and the Dinka peoples. In terms of famine prevention policy, Keen argues that the policy employed during this period was emasculated¹ by economic and political interests, notably Britain's interest in Nile River access. Although the Anglo-Egyptian administration eventually adopted an equitable protection policy for southern interests in 1922, Keen's historical analysis shows that decades of minimal and unbalanced infrastructural and educational development in the South dissolved this famine protection, sharpened ethnic divisions, and ultimately fueled the 1988 famine.

Keen challenges neoclassical economic theory by redefining "market forces" as "forced markets" to emphasize how markets are susceptible to politics and interest groups. To show how these forced markets were deliberately created to promote the interests of government officials, merchants, and militiamen, he traces the loss of production and assets due to migration, raiding, and drought, and examines the changing prices in grain, cattle, labor, and transport markets.

Keen pursues an unconventional approach to political analysis, in which he argues that policy failure in Sudan was a result of concealed policy agendas rather than poor implementation. He argues that key aid agencies, such as the European Community, the United Nations, and the U.S. Agency for International Development, contributed to policy failure by succumbing to the Sudanese relief agenda. These donors repeatedly shirked their responsibility to famine victims by failing to monitor relief distribution, evading discussion about the relationship between raiding and famine, and inaccurately and conveniently deeming politically controversial zones inaccessible. By sacrificing their financial leverage with the Sudanese government, donors actively allowed the intentional promotion of famine to continue.

Within the historical, economic, and political functions that Keen unravels, he argues that the famine was mitigated in 1988 by increased security for the Dinka through the broadening

presence and power of the Sudanese People's Liberation Army, as well as the return of rainfall to some areas and changing relief patterns in response to heightened media attention. However, Keen asserts that this positive change occurred after the climax of the famine and was neither adequate compensation nor a sustainable remedy² for decades of exploitation.

Keen's analysis of famine in Sudan offers the research community general themes that can be applied to the analysis of other famines, governments and international organizations insight into policy implications, and human rights organizations a more transparent understanding of where to focus their efforts.³ By presenting universal theories based on the violation of human rights and lack of political representation, he brings a fresh approach to analyzing famine and moves beyond the narrow standpoint of famine as solely a result of a natural disaster. Further, by presenting counter-intuitive truths that challenge our basic assumptions he adds a new layer of analytical depth.⁴ For example, Keen's theory of economically stable groups becoming vulnerable to famine because other groups seek to capture their wealth demonstrates⁵ the mechanism utilized by politically powerful groups and provides an explanation for why and how the beneficiary groups profit.

However, Keen does not sufficiently address the drought conditions of the period. While he briefly mentions these conditions as a cause of declining assets and the return of rain as contributing to the end of the famine, he fails to present statistical evidence showing how the climate affected the famine and to juxtapose the role of the drought with other functions presented in the book.

Nevertheless, the most striking application of Keen's work is that his understanding of the Sudanese famine is useful in analyzing other famines. Although "it is dangerous to generalize about famines" (p. 224), the patterns Keen identifies transcend geographical boundaries. For example, militia raiding was a primary cause and function of famine in Somalia and Ethiopia; famine victims in Ireland, the Ukraine, and Somalia were previously economically stable groups.

Further, Keen's analysis is pertinent to the current Darfur genocide, which shares with the 1988 famine a complex history of neglected development, politically marginalized groups, and government and international beneficiaries. In his foreword to *The Benefits of Famine*, Douglas H. Johnson calls the famine a "dress rehearsal for Darfur" and describes Keen's analysis as "as relevant to understanding the ongoing war in Darfur as it is to understanding the recently ended civil war" (p. xvi). For example, understanding how the Sudanese Government employed militia raiding in the nineteenth century can shed light on the government's current strategy of arming and financing the Janjaweed militiamen in the Darfur region while concurrently minimizing national army costs and avoiding international criticism and direct association with the conflict. Also, similar to the British administration's strategic interest in Nile River access during the twentieth century, peripheral power interests—such as the United States' interest in intelligence information gathering—exist and operate today within the Darfur peace process. Finally, parallel to international donors' negligence in implementing sufficient precautionary steps for effective relief distribution during the famine, peripheral powers also failed to implement a security mechanism to ensure maximum protection prior to the issuance of the International Criminal Court arrest warrant for Sudanese President Omar al-Bashir. As a result, humanitarian

aid organizations' fear of expulsion became reality when al-Bashir expelled thirteen international organizations, leaving hundreds of thousands of Darfuris without food and water.

Although the victims of the Darfur genocide have received more aid than the victims of the 1988 famine, national and international denial of the beneficiaries of the genocide continues to undermine needed relief efforts.⁶ In this light, Keen's analysis of the southwestern Sudan famine provides researchers, governments, and international organizations with a tool for analyzing, understanding, and effectively changing policies that allow beneficiaries to profit from the marginalization of politically powerless groups.

Reviewer:

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