

Thomas, K. (2010). *Human life matters: The ecology of sustainable human living vs. the rule of the barbarians*. Charleston, SC: Karen Thomas. 224 pages. ISBN 9781452811741.

Reviewed by
Katie Thomas
Telethon Institute for Child Health Research,
University of Western Australia, Australia
blumoon.47@gmail.com

This book is a treatise on the need for cultural transformation in global systems. It suggests that what needs to be addressed is the domination of the financially and physically strong over the majority; the insemination of raw, competitive greed into cultural life; and the imposition of dominance and aggression onto most human interactions. The stated purpose of the text is to foster understanding of systemic factors undermining quality of life in the 21st century and to highlight the role of propaganda in fostering apathy and inaction. The author suggests that those who have little systemic power – the poor, the marginalised, children, elderly, differently abled – are increasingly denied access, not only to material wealth, but to dignity, community, belonging, safety and possibility. Those who wish to obtain these rights must now sacrifice family and individual life to the wealth bargain, or forever accept an inferior and uncertain status in cultures increasingly shaped for an elite few. The text is targeted at the general public to encourage wider, more inclusive conversations about the nature of justice and its relevance to human development. The rationale is to provide accessible knowledge to feed population based movements and assist in the formation of effective resistance.

The author suggests that, since the 1980s, the re-concentration of national and international decision making and control of resources into the hands of a few has resulted in social decay and devolution at community,

national and global levels. The author intimates that we have re-created the aristocracies of old with economic elites whose behaviours are buffered by obscene personal wealth and reified by the 'rule of the market.' She suggests that there has been a silent overthrow of *liberté, égalité* and *fraternité* and a re-enshrinement of barbarism. Barbarism is synonymous with a belief in the superiority of some people and a willingness to use cruel or vicious behaviours towards those who are considered inferior or undeserving in any way. It is considered acceptable within barbaric philosophy to exert power and control over those who are classed as less powerful or 'unworthy' and to use whatever tactics are most effective to maintain control over said humans, including tactics which are inhumane or cruel. The book overcomes traditional polarities of capitalism/communism, male/female, and rich/poor, although inequity is postulated as antithetical to human progress. The overarching discourse is centralised on the increased normalisation of cruelty and aggression under discursive notions such as progress, profit and regularity. The first section of the text is an overview of the concept of barbarism, the 10 tenets of barbaric creed and how barbarism has risen to become a global cultural norm.

The text describes the deification of barbarism that has swept the globe alongside phenomena of market reification, globalism and neo-liberalism. The author suggests that this has resulted in increases in antisocial norms, naiveté about the effects of different uses of power, social acceptance of inhumane behaviours and ineffective responses to human atrocities. Barbarism is implicated in the unnecessary violence, suffering, and deprivations foisted on those who could not, *or would not*, compete in the global market. The author purports that this newest resurgence of barbarism is an opportunity to become clear about what barbaric philosophy is and where it has infiltrated, or dictated, the

construction of the axiomatic social order. Understanding is the foundational step for effecting powerful systemic change. The author suggests that cultural transformation should be our most serious and focused endeavour.

The second section of the text is an overview of the specific impacts of barbaric incursion at macro (environment, species, culture, government); meso (community, family, work); and micro (individual, intrapsychic, health) levels. In these sections the author follows Foucauldian notions of normalisation, discipline and punishment and describes the radical social restructuring which would be required to effect global change. She suggests that systems must become emotionalised through the centralisation of human relationships of care and that cultures could be transformed through systemic prioritisation of children and the vulnerable.

The text highlights the harm done to children under barbarism. The pillaging of children's potential, vision, wellbeing, family life, education and the physical environment of their future, is symptomatic of the pillaging that occurs across all resource domains during barbaric rule. The future of children living in poverty is most seriously affected by barbarian regimens, because the removal of even a few resources can impair their development and capacities for life. The author points out that the past two decades of exploitation of resources has so widened the gap between the rich and the poor that it is no longer possible for a single generation to breach it with a lifetime of hard labour. With the current disparities, it cannot be breached in two, three, or even four lifetimes and therefore we have recreated the aristocracy. In so doing, we have pillaged the democratic possibilities that belonged to the next generations and the futures of all children, except those of the elite.

The text relies on publicly accessible United Nations and national datasets from

national and agglomerated surveys and, as such, generalises rather than specifies. The language is rarely objective, often dogmatic and, at times, the author is inclined to hyperbole. The incongruent synthesis of pessimism and idealism will unsettle many, as will the lack of homage paid to cynicism. Cynicism is dismissed as an inoperant philosophical system. The writing is flatly unequivocal and does not exhibit more nuanced formats of academic prose. At times the wordiness is obfuscating rather than clarifying and the jargonised nature of some of the chapters may thwart the intention to make the text publicly accessible. The author may be guilty of *petitio principii* in analyses where definition of barbarism is validated using broad brush strokes of cultural analysis. The reader is expected, in an ad hoc manner, to cross from epidemiology to physiology to population-based statistics and to comprehend the interdependence of all levels of human life (environment, culture, intrapsychic, relational). The reader is left to make the complex connections between macro and micro level impacts with adumbrated author links. While the individual chapters may be of practical usefulness as critical readings the caveat must be given that the writing does not adhere to the voice of the neutral observer and there is much disciplinary boundary crossing, with little adherence to disciplinary history or protocols. Readings drawn from this text would be polemic rather than theoretically clarifying. The text does not refer explicitly to community psychology theories. It raises dialectics but does not resolve them.

The author uses barbarism as an overarching philosophical category suggesting that while there is some overlap with the binaries of wealth-poverty, male-female, and black-white there is no absolute correlation. Adherence to the barbaric code, enacted in behaviours and attitudes, leads to the embodiment or denial of human rights.

Thus, there is a contentious chapter on gender which will satisfy neither the feminists nor the misogynists. The author acknowledges the polarisations of the genders and the oppression of women as a core global issue stating that, "The question of male prerogative over female bodies may well be the question which decides the fate of the species," but simultaneously argues that it is still behaviour that defines barbarism, not gender. She suggests that females are "just as capable as males of embracing barbarism as a philosophy and, when they have power, are of equal harm to others and to species progress when they do so. The current difference is that, due to allocations of global power fewer females have had access to enough power to have mass effect." While analysis is made of bodies as sites of exploitation, less space is devoted to bodies as sites of resistance and the complexities of body politics are not discussed in detail.

One of the stated purposes of this writing is to mobilise those of goodwill in consensus of the need for active, vocal, and visible solidarity. The author states that, "Caring alliance, effective resistance, radical thought and transformative behaviour will each be essential if we are to overturn the oligarchy of oppressive human control." Some general propositions and guidelines are given for the initiation of such links but again, there is little specificity. The author is relying heavily on the self-organising capacity of a galvanised public. The book concludes with a call for focus on possibility and on the critical need for revolutionary dialogue but this is a fledgling and incomplete discussion. The book's main contribution may be in raising debate rather than in resolution. The book is available in hard copy and e-format through Amazon.com.