DEBATES

Earthquake, Humanitarianism and Intervention in Haiti

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DUPUY *continued*...

[5] Quoted in Pascal Fletcher, "Improved U.S. terms for Haiti textile imports sought," *Reuters*, March 22, 2010.

[6] Cited in Kim Ives, "International Donors' Conference at the UN: For $10 Billion of Promises, Haiti Surrenders Its Sovereignty," *Haiti Liberté*, March 31-April 6, 2010, Vol. 3, No. 37.

[7] David L. Wilson, "'Rebuilding Haiti'—the Sweatshop Hoax," *MRZine*, April 3, 2010 <mrzine.monthlyreview.org/2010/wilson040310.html>. ■

Haiti's January 12 earthquake, with its death toll of about 300,000 people, was one of the greatest humanitarian catastrophes the planet has ever known. It gave rise to an unprecedented mobilization of humanitarian aid, with countries, multilateral institutions, non-governmental organizations (there are more than 10,000 in Haiti), charitable institutions, evangelical missions, associations of every kind, celebrities from music, film, sports, and every stripe of what could be called "the charity business sector," all bustling about and rushing to the aid of the disaster victims. For everyone, there was but one certainty: nothing short of a massive humanitarian aid effort was necessary for Haiti.[1]

President Obama dispatched an emblematic pair of ex-presidents, Bill Clinton and George W. Bush, to emphasize the bipartisan nature of the U.S. rescue effort, and to remind us of this ethical imperative: aid should transcend everything today, including and especially political divisions. As they set off for Haiti, Clinton—who, since 2009, has been United Nations Special Envoy to Haiti—remarked that the cataclysm "reminds us of our common humanity. It reminds us that needs go beyond ephemeral discords," while Bush protested against those who sought to politicize the aid to Haiti and plead for an ad hoc apoliticism: "Now is not the time to concentrate on politics."

Let us suppose that we take them at their word: the fact remains that their humanist pronouncements were not meant to reassure the victims. Their intended audience was elsewhere. When Clinton pleaded the Haitian cause at the World Economic Forum in Davos last January, he did not skimp on his arguments to the heads of the planet's multinational companies. The Haitians are "workers and creators" he said, and the climate prevailing in the country was very favorable for business. Pressing the businessmen not to miss this opportunity to do business under a government favorable to foreign investors, Clinton invited them to become part of the "adventure."

Whether or Haiti is a good investment for Davos attendees, and whether or not we ought to leave "politics" behind, there is one word whose lack of clear meaning is almost as striking as the world's generous reaction to January 12—"humanitarianism." To get to its essence in today's Haiti, and, indeed, in today's world one must avoid, *hic et nunc*, the pitfall of evidentiary truths, of sentiments that reassure, of received, convenient, acritical and non-subversive ideas in order to question, in all objectivity, certain current mystified and mystifying representations of reality.

To do so, all the semantic enchantment of the words like "solidarity," "charity," "rescue," "pity," and "aid," and the noble sentiments that they evoke, must also be left behind so that the concrete representations of humanitarianism in today's Haiti can be examined in the harsh light of day.

The "Social" Nature of the Humanitarian Disaster

The prevailing rescue sentiment and the underlying evocation of compassion for the victims are neither as neutral nor as innocent as the notion of humanitarianism might lead one to believe. On the contrary, the ideology related to the current representation of humanitarianism contributes to our disregard of the social nature of January's catastrophe. For in fact, the consequences of the natural disaster were exponentially amplified by a form of historically constituted social organization—neocolonialism—that incessantly generates and renews the domination, exploitation,

underdevelopment, misery and vulnerability of Haitian society.

Michel Forst, the French magistrate who is the UN's independent expert on Haiti's human rights situation, has noted that in order to understand what occurred, it is necessary to bear in mind the country's longstanding vulnerability and poverty. Indeed, *Vulnerability and Poverty in Haiti* is the title of the 2005 national report on human development published by the United Nations Development Program (UNDP).[2] Despite the limits of this document—since it involves a kind of partial balance sheet for liberalism done by liberals—it has the virtue of bringing these two variables into correlation: vulnerability and poverty. Looking at the issue through a human rights lens, the UNDP authors recognize that vulnerability "is a situation that tends to deteriorate, particularly in a society like Haiti. In the case [of this country], one cannot fail to mention three vulnerability factors that have led repeatedly in recent history to disasters: the political crisis (…), the economic crisis (…) and the environmental crisis…."[3]

Even the World Bank admits that Haiti "is one of the countries most vulnerable to natural disasters… as a result of extreme poverty" and other factors like a "degraded environment" and "a series of inefficient governments confronted by serious fiscal problems."[4]

Thus there has clearly been a "socialization" of natural risks and disasters, and the differentiated impacts—between countries of the North and South—serves as an instrument for measuring the socio-economic inequality between those countries and regions.

Militarization and NGO-ization of Humanitarianism

Since the end of the Cold War, humanitarian action has become an important, and even essential, component of certain states' foreign policy playbook. Vulnerability has grown in the global South, and emergency situations have multiplied across the globe. Thus, with increasing frequency, we witness deployments of not only civil but also military aid in order to respond "effectively" to the complexities of the "emergency" situations.

Following the fiasco of the U.S. intervention in Somalia in 1993 and also the absence of a coordinated action among the different humanitarian aid protagonists (civil governmental, non-governmental and military) in Haiti in 1994, successive U.S. administrations have attempted to better coordinate their multidimensional responses to these emergency situations. More often than not, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have been at the heart of these strategies.

As vice president, Al Gore advocated the insertion of NGOs into the global humanitarian aid system "in order to promote democracy and the development of a free market system."[5] The events of September 11, 2001, accelerated this process of the integration of humanitarian response with other components of governmental response—including diplomacy and military action. Colin Powell, with a hint of sincerity sufficiently rare at this level of responsibility to be worth noting, has acknowledged that, "we [the U.S. government] have excellent relations with the NGOs which can be a "force multiplier" and "an important part of our combat team."[6] The NGOs, that is, contribute to what has come to be called soft power.

Since the 1990s, there has been a general evolution of the practice of NGOs. They have moved away from the traditional and classical approach of volunteer humanitarianism based on the principles of neutrality, impartiality and independence as proclaimed and defended, for example, by the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC). But this is a dangerous situation. The association of humanitarianism with militarism and politics can lead to the disappearance of authentic humanitarianism.

The confusion of genres is in itself perverse and in fact can lead to the violation of international humanitarian law and to its crisis, a situation that largely facilitates the establishment of a *modus vivendi* around what might be called "humanitarian neocolonialism," in which the NGOs gradually find themselves assigned by governments to a compensatory function, secondary execution tasks or subcontracting. However honest many NGO activists might be, and whatever the sincerity of their humanitarian commitment, the implicit role of the overwhelming majority of the so-called "non-governmental" organizations—many of which receive large portions of their financing from state funds—is to reinforce existing systems of domination and exploitation.

A glance at the humanitarian reaction and apparatus in Haiti—with the early hegemonic U.S. military presence—offers a very concrete example of this paradigm shift. Early in the relief efforts, a photographic image made the rounds of the national and international media: U.S. soldiers are perched in an Army helicopter in full flight, tossing sacks of food overboard to earthquake victims, who, on the ground, come running from everywhere and fight amongst themselves to collect whatever they can.

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This image is highly symbolic. The degrading nature of the procedure—which shocked those of good conscience and sparked a veritable global outcry—makes clear the absolute incompatibility between, on the one hand, the security preoccupations of any army and, on the other hand, the respect for the dignity and the humanity of the beneficiaries of the aid rightfully called humanitarian.

The other forces on the Haitian scene are the ubiquitous "blue helmets"—the United Nations Stabilization Mission in Haiti (MINUSTAH), units of the French, Canadian, even Israeli armies. They number in the tens of thousands but are nothing in comparison to the impressive deployment (in personnel and equipment) of "Uncle Sam" during the first days after the catastrophe. Washington mobilized 22,000 people for initial emergency intervention. The United States had exclusive control of the strategic points (the airport and the seaport at Port-au-Prince among others) and designated itself as "principal agency" in Haiti, to a strategic regional military force, the United States Southern Command.

Other players, both official and private, complained about the complications of emergency action stemming directly from the centralization of the decisions by the U.S. authorities beyond any control of the Haitian administration. Not only did presidents of Cuba, Venezuela, Ecuador and Nicaragua complain, but French president Nicolas Sarkozy also raised his voice against the notion of placing Haiti in trusteeship, defending the sovereignty of its people as well as its right to self-determination. The very conservative French newspaper *Le Figaro* even ran a headline on January 25, 2010 this way: "Haiti in a game of influence dominated by the United States."

The Instrumentalization of an Unnatural Disaster

The military-humanitarian intervention in January is not without precedent in Haiti. Indeed, a quick perusal of UN resolutions and the resulting "peacekeeping" missions shows the repeated instrumentalization of Haiti's ongoing humanitarian crisis. In 1993 and 1994, with Resolutions 841 and 940, the UN Security Council justified a "multinational" intervention (it was comprised of some 20,000 U.S. troops and a few thousand soldiers from other countries) in order, in part, to respond to "the incidences of humanitarian crises."

And today, in addition to the MINUSTAH soldiers and police, the U.S. Army doctors and engineers dispersed around the country, the "experts" and specialists from various multilateral institutions working with various Haitian government ministries and agencies, there is a new form of intervention and re-colonization. The Interim Haiti Reconstruction Commission has a mandate of 18 months and is co-presided over by Haitian Prime Minister Jean-Max Bellerive and former U.S. President Bill Clinton. Its principal task is to plan and execute the country's "reconstruction."

The Haiti Action Plan for National Recovery and Development (PDNA), the commission's guiding document, was prepared in haste, essentially by experts from the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, the Inter-American Development Bank, etc. A few details from local experts were added, just for good measure.[7] Numerous voices—inside and outside of Haiti—have been raised against the plan because of the lack of participation from Haitian sectors.

Today's humanitarianism, or at least its representation in the current Haitian context, constitutes a veritable ideology in the sense that it gives a false representation—a reverse, deformed and deforming image—to reality. This distortion of the real, which is not by chance, contributes to the global mystification endeavor that is necessary to implement the new humanitarian neocolonialism or, better, neocolonial humanitarianism. And the world's interventionist powers, those who maintain and fund the world's leading neocolonial humanitarian aid organizations, have figured out how to take full advantage of this doctrine.

Such is the case in Haiti where humanitarian-aid action, placed initially under the control of the military, and now subcontracted to the Clinton-led commission, and to bilateral and multilateral agencies and NGOs serves objectively as an instrument to reinforce the domination of the country by the U.S. superpower and the "international community," which Washington utilizes, in this event, to its own ends.

But the recolonization is being strongly contested. Beyond provoking the discontent and irritation of numerous governments throughout the world, Haitians themselves are beginning to become aware of and mobilize against what appears to them to be an endeavor to dispossess them of their sovereignty—or what remains of it—and of their right to determine the reconstruction of their country. To the extent that humanitarian aid management, within the context of Haiti's neocolonial system, shows its serious deficiencies, it will end up fueling the already simmering anger of the population that has lived through decades of slow-cooking disaster followed by the eruption of the January 12 catastrophe.

Neocolonial humanitarianism might deliver some tents and a few bags of rice, but its mode of delivery—with paternalism that can

even bleed into contempt—can produce more than "relief."

Caveant consules!

Endnotes

[1] Conscious or not, some imply the humanitarian crisis stems from the January 12 earthquake. But a look at any of numerous reports from international organizations or NGOs—with their statistics concerning access to water, healthcare, sanitation, housing, etc.—make it clear that the Haitian population has been living in a "humanitarian crisis" for decades.

[2] PNUD, *Vulnérabilité et pauvreté en Haiti*, Rapport national sur le développement humain, 2005.

[3] *Idem,* p.87.

[4] Dilley, Maxx, et al., *Natural disaster hotspots*, Washington, DC: World Bank, 2005.

[5] Robert Charvin, "Notes sur les dérives de l'humanitaire dans l'ordre international," *Revue belge de droit international,* Bruylant, Bruxelles, pp. 468-485.

[6] Conférence à Washington, 26 octobre 2005 cited by Rony Brauman "Mission civilisatrice, ingérence humanitaire" *in Le Monde diplomatique* de septembre 2005.

[7] On this subject, see *Le Nouvelliste* "Haïti : des experts vont accoucher du PDNA pour Haïti," édition du 12 mars 2010, <www.lenouvelliste.com>. ■

Opportunity Amidst the Wreckage Rebuilding Haiti's University System

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After the earthquake of January 12, an international group of academics, including myself, formed a group called the International Committee for the Construction of a University Campus for l'Université d'Etat d'Haiti (UEH), Haiti's state university. The founding idea was to organize a group that would contribute to the design and implementation of a lasting and modern renewal of the country's academic institutions. The universal sentiment of the group's founders was that Haiti should not lose the opportunity created by the terrible tragedy of January 12.

Several schools of the UEH, located in various parts of the capital city, Port-au-Prince, were severely damaged as a result of the earthquake and some of these facilities are no longer functional. Given that the physical reconstruction of the university is an immediate necessity, it would be advantageous for the UEH to relocate all of its schools and departments in one place, not only to function more efficiently in economic terms, but also to facilitate a more collegial atmosphere among students, professors and researchers in all fields.

To achieve this goal, the UEH requires a considerable sum of money, more than the university or even the nation of Haiti has at its disposal at this time, given the destruction of the building that housed the taxing authority and all its documents, and the damage to ports through which activities that generate hard currency must pass. The beautiful word "solidarity" is now Haiti's password.

The Committee has as its principal objective the raising of a substantial part of the funds that the UEH needs to build a safe and modern campus, with buildings that will not be vulnerable to hurricanes and will have the latest anti-seismic technology. The Committee will send the money collected directly to the UEH, which will give official notification of the receipt of the funds and will apply them exclusively to campus construction. The UEH will not, under any circumstance, be able to spend the money on any other activities.

Haitians must reconstruct their country in the context of solid development so that they can overcome, progressively and in the coming months, the terrible situation created by the earthquake of January 12 and, at the same time, create a development model that will allow the country to increase its standard of living over the coming years.

In that context, given the strong correlation between higher education and development, the country must be able to count on a solid university system. Haiti's national university can and should assume the role of educating future professionals and leaders in science, social science, and culture: agronomists, architects, engineers, doctors, professors and researchers, advanced technicians, etc.

Rebuilding the physical plant, therefore, is not enough. Rethinking the role of higher education in Haiti is also an imperative task at this time. In this context there are a number of urgent questions that must be confronted in order to reconstruct a Haitian university system worthy of the name.

The Functions of the University

One key question deals with the nature and function of the university itself. We now have the opportunity to ask ourselves whether we want the university to essentially be a place of prolonged secondary education—a complaint I lodged some time ago—or whether we would rather convert it into an authentic institution of higher learning, containing all of the instrumental apparatus required for the production and dissemination of knowledge in the contemporary world.