

Earthquake Haiti gives rise to the Entitled

Anil Persaud

Let's face it, after over 200 years, Haiti is yet again bringing the world together. And it is doing so for two well known reasons that have never quite bounced against each other as they have since this recent earthquake. The first reason is the knowledge we have all been quietly living with all our years that Haiti 'is an impoverished country, one of the world's poorest and least developed.' Secondly, the acknowledgement that the Haitian Revolution was the first revolution of the 'third world,' the beacon of modern anti-colonial movements the world over. A combination of guilt and pride. Be it on historical or humanitarian grounds, there seems to be consensus that a debt is owed to Haiti and that now is the time to pay. 'Third worlds' as well as 'first worlds', for very different reasons, have to and are paying up.

Some are keen to routinize this terrible disaster into a 'war against poverty'. Globalization's High Priest, UN secretary general, Bani Ki-moon, clarified the neoliberal response, 'Haiti's plight is a reminder of our wider responsibilities. A decade ago, the international community began a new century by agreeing to act to eliminate extreme poverty by 2015. ... We are very far from delivering on our promises of a better future for the world's poor.' As the anti-war activist and economist Michel Chossudovsky, observing 'The Militarization of Emergency Aid to Haiti,' has asked, 'Is it a Humanitarian Operation or an Invasion?'¹ Interestingly, the Washington Post reported a few days ago, 'Haiti earthquake gives Guantanamo new mission.'² For the war mongering wealthy even an earthquake is an opportunity to go to war. But as the initiatives of many are proving, this time it will not be so easy.

For instance, as reported in The Nation newspaper, the IMF's managing director Dominique Strauss-Kahn has explained that 'The most important thing is that the IMF is now working with all donors to try to delete all the Haitian debt, including our new [\$100 earthquake relief] loan.' The journalist, author and activist filmmaker Naomi Klein, has put this charitable act in perspective: this is, she writes, 'unprecedented in my experience and shows that public pressure in moments of disaster can seriously subvert shock doctrine tactics.' Similar pressure is being applied through a petition by The ONE Campaign Team calling on Haiti's creditors (including Chavez's Venezuela) to act quickly and cancel Haiti's \$1 billion debt.

When Inuit peoples in what is known as Canada contribute \$90,000, when Palestinians in Gaza donate money, food and clothes for Haiti relief efforts we have to ask ourselves why?³ One possible reason is that we are witnessing a moving and passionate interpretation of those famous lyrics, 'How long shall they kill our prophets/While we stand aside and look?'

¹ Global Research, 15 January 2010, <http://www.globalresearch.ca/index.php?context=viewArticle&code=CHO20100115&articleId=17000>

² Ben Fox, Associated Press, 21 January 2010, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/01/21/AR2010012103547.html>

³ A lengthy and impressive list of 'Humanitarian response by national governments to the 2010 Haiti earthquake' is compiled at: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Humanitarian_response_by_national_governments_to_the_2010_Haiti_earthquake.

In another instance of new solidarities, the International Humanist and Ethical Union (IHEU) is partnering with a new disaster relief fund called 'Non-Believers Giving Aid' to channel aid to Haiti and to give 'lie to the canard that you need God to be good.' As their website, set up by the atheist biologist Richard Dawkins, explains: 'Non-believers give as individuals: we have no church through which to give collectively, no church to rack up statistics of competitive generosity.'⁴

Such actions as those few given above are more than enough to render nonsensical such callous, reactionary comments as 'Haitian beggars cannot be choosers and must therefore stifle any criticism of the aid donors and be grateful,' – made in response to Alissa Trotz's piece, 'Solidarity, Not Help.' Solidarity in this centuries old global community that has built up around Haiti means that there will have to be all kinds of 'burning and looting tonight.'

But the actions of the Haitian people, keeping firmly in mind their revolutionary past, embolden us to do and think much more. For instance, not only about how we give, but how we take: do we beg, borrow or loot? With gap between the rich and the poor widening, for the world's majority this is the question of the day.

The role played by world's wealthiest nations in impoverishing Haiti was dealt with in Trotz's column. I will focus instead on how in the era of capitalist globalization, learning with the Haitian people, we can celebrate the fact that, while there is growing poverty in the world, at least there are no longer any beggars. This I will do by following how Haiti's poverty is used to explain everything from the need for aid to the inability to deliver aid and then how that very poverty is ignored when private property is attacked by 'looters.'

It is a sign of our desperate times that we need a reason to assist the people of Haiti. Haitian poverty, to the disgust of many, is the most popular. It is present in all media reports on the quake as well as in the justification, as if one is needed, for the international funding agencies and governments to pay. Also playing out in the discourse of the same actors is the extent to which Haiti's poverty has added to the disastrous effects of the 12th January earthquake. A study by the Organization of American States concluded last month that 'many of the buildings in Haiti were so shoddily constructed that they were unlikely to survive any disaster, let alone an earthquake like the one that devastated Port-au-Prince on Tuesday.'⁵ This collapse of Haiti's infrastructure, caused by its impoverishment, is also, to add insult to injury, blamed for aid not reaching people in need. The delays caused by such destruction, compounded by near total breakdown of health and communication services are, as reports stress, costing lives. Poverty kills people. Why it takes a 7.0 earthquake to make us accept this truth is baffling.

Headlines such as 'Looters roam Port-au-Prince as earthquake death toll estimate climbs'⁶ and "A frenzy of looting' seen in Haiti's capital"⁷ flood our screens and newspapers. What is astounding about such reporting is evident from the opening paragraph of the former article: 'The death toll from Haiti's earthquake climbed to as high as an estimated 140,000, as logistical bottlenecks delayed aid and stoked *looting by survivors desperate for food and water.*' The reporter acknowledges the plight of the people but goes on in the same breath to label them 'looters'! We need a new language

⁴ <http://givingaid.richarddawkins.net/>. See also: <http://www.iheu.org/humanists-help-haiti>

⁵ 'Problems with Haiti building standards outlined.' By Tom Watkins, CNN January 14, 2010, <http://edition.cnn.com/2010/WORLD/americas/01/13/haiti.construction/index.html>

⁶ Rory Carroll, Latin America correspondent, guardian.co.uk, Saturday 16 January 2010, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2010/jan/15/looters-roam-port-au-prince>

⁷ Anderson Cooper, CNN, January 19, 2010.

<http://edition.cnn.com/2010/WORLD/americas/01/18/haiti.looting.earthquake/>

to describe people doing what it takes to survive. Can we describe the people of Haiti, struggling to eat, find shelter and stay protected from harsh nature, 'looters,' as dishonest? Is the 'looting' by American soldiers of Iraqi museums the same as the 'looting' for a 'box of candles' or a 'sack of rice' by people in Haiti? When even the media recognizes that people are starving, that the aid provided cannot reach the people, can peoples doing what it takes to survive be called 'looters'! The recent report that 'Police kill man [a 20 year old carpenter] in Haiti over allegedly stolen rice'⁸ reminds us not only that poverty kills, but that the struggle against poverty also kills. I ask you if, in some sense that makes common sense, this carpenter wasn't *entitled* to that sack of rice? One of the effects of globalization is that the connections between us and our planet are more evident. Every 'natural' disaster is also a human made disaster, the surviving of which also therefore embodies a legitimate sense of entitlement. How different would the implications of the above headline be if it read instead: 'Police kills *Entitled* in Haiti over allegedly stolen rice'? There are lives at stake in the language we use.

It is crucial that we challenge the rubbish morality, the racism and the destructive rightwing agendas being slipped in with all the polite talk of 'charity,' 'aid' 'relief' and 'help'? Let it be exposed that within the same logic that acknowledges that poverty kills people is contained an even more sinister new social value: private property is sacred. This is the message that the neoliberal donor community is keen to send out to the world, and they will not allow a natural disaster to stop them. The Haitian 'Entitleds' do not recognize private property and the message from our Evil-angelists and Crime Ministers alike is that if the earthquake did not kill you for that then our guns will. As Trotz's article last week reminded us, solidarity with Haiti is an act to thwart that anti-people agenda. Haiti has an uncanny habit of forcing history to unfold in unprecedented ways; now is the time when profits will have to respect prophets and people are organizing around the world to ensure precisely that.

Bio: Anil Persaud is a Postdoc historian with the International Institute of Social History, Amsterdam. He lives in New Delhi. A shorter version of this article was published in the Stabroek News on 25/01/10 at <http://www.stabroeknews.com/2010/features/01/25/earthquake-haiti-gives-rise-to-the-entitled/print/>

⁸ Karl Penhaul, CNN, January 22, 2010.
<http://edition.cnn.com/2010/WORLD/americas/01/21/haiti.police.shooting/index.html>