

Disasters are Big Business

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Theme: [Poverty & Social Inequality](#)

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I am staggered. There are 10,000 'NGOs' (Non-Governmental Organizations) in Haiti, one for every 900 inhabitants and each one of them has no doubt at least one Westerner working within, yet aside from the [Cuban health workers](#), it seems they could do nothing until the gringos arrived with their Blackhawks and nuclear-tipped aircraft carrier and of course, the 82nd Airborne, paying yet another 'visit' to this benighted and super-exploited land to 'secure' the place for the locust storm of aid to come (too late for too many).

Now I've never been a fan of 'NGOs' not only because my own experience with them has been less than edifying but because they are the direct result of 'benign neglect' on the part of the state. In other words they initially appeared to fill a void left when states washed their hands of the mess they'd left behind or they just ditched their responsibilities.

But unlike governments who are, in theory anyway, answerable to their electorate, 'NGOs' are answerable to no one. They are not elected, they are not representative. In their way they are more like neo-colonial 'stand-ins' for the former colonizers, at least at the 'social services' end of things. Well, it seems many of the 10,000 have been tested and found wanting.

Now this is not say that there aren't thousands, even tens of thousands of people who genuinely want to help (Brits have so far donated more than £30 million to Haiti Relief) but compare the role of the Cuban medical teams with most of the other 'NGOs' working in Haiti, all ten thousand of them. The Cubans have the direct backing of the Cuban state with all that that entails. Moreover, they were able to draw on their own experiences with disasters to which Cuba is no stranger and react immediately and effectively (not that you'd have seen it reported much on your TV screens but they were first on the scene).

I have no idea how many people in the 'developed' world owe their living to other people's misfortunes but it surely must run into millions and given that the most advanced of the capitalist states now have largely 'service' economies under which I assume 'NGOs' fall, disasters make a major contribution to their economies.

The Media: Old habits die hard

Integral to this is the media's vested interest in disasters (the bigger they are, the more profitable they are) and moreover, putting the right 'spin' on how the disasters are presented to the captive, metropolitan audience is absolutely vital as we have witnessed with the media's 'take' on the Haitian catastrophe. So much so that questions are now being asked about the role the media played in stopping aid from getting in because it kept hyping the 'violence', 'looting' and 'armed gangs' aspect of the disaster.[1]

Just compare the media coverage of the Tsunami in Asia in 2004 with that of Haiti. Did we see daily headlines about the problem of 'security' or 'looting', or 'armed gangs' following the devastating Tsunami? No we did not. But why the enormous difference in the media coverage of these two, equally cataclysmic events?

The problem for the media is that they have already demonized the people of Haiti, not only through historically-rooted, racist myths about for example, 'Voodoo' (actually Vodun, an animist/ancestor-worship religion that came from West Africa with the slaves), but the way contemporary events in Haiti have been presented to Western audiences. You know the stuff, 'gangs', drugs, violence, the Ton-Ton Macoute, marxists, revolutionary priests, 'failed state', corruption, 'dictators' and dictators. This is the picture the media/state have presented to us. They made it so.

There is no history, no mention of our, that is Western culpability in the inability of the Haitian state to survive intact, let alone thrive and prosper after such a disaster. This is what the US, Canada and France have turned Haiti into: nothing more than a source of cheap labour for US offshore manufacturing and some tourism (who amazingly, still arrived just after the quake struck and took up residence.

"As surviving Haitians fought over scraps of food, luxury cruise ship passengers frolicked heedlessly Monday at a resort just 81 miles from the misery transfixing the world. Royal Caribbean's gigantic 3,100-passenger Navigator of the Seas stopped at a north Haiti beach so tourists could parasail, snorkel and chow down on barbecue. The tourists went ashore at Labadee, a lavish and heavily guarded private beach leased by the cruise line where passengers bounce on trampolines, sip cocktails in a hammock and shop at an ersatz "native market." — ['Royal Caribbean cruise ships such as Navigator of the Seas still escorting vacationers to Haiti'](#), New York Daily News, 19 January, 2010.

Haiti, formerly one of the richest of the Caribbean nations, has been denuded of its forests, import substitution (imposed by the IMF and the World Bank) bankrupted the rural population who were forced to relocate to the cities in order to survive, hence the scale of carnage. US-backed/sponsored/instigated coups litter the country's history as well as long term military occupation. The West have turned Haiti into a 'basket-case' unable to respond in any meaningful way not only to the catastrophe but to care for its citizens. This is the West's legacy, never mind its 'largesse' after the fact. This too is Business.

All of the above and more, underpins the way the media approaches a culture that has been under Western assault for two hundred and six years (since 1804 when the first free Black Republic in the (Western) world was declared).[2]

Is it any wonder therefore that it dare not go down the road that challenges the misconception that Western intervention is anything other than 'humanitarian' and because 'we feel your pain'.[3]

The way media handles all things Haitian is perhaps exemplified by the issue of the Haitian 'orphans' being stolen by the West. I first came across a reference to it as a single sentence in a BBC piece and I [referred](#) to it at the time. The BBC piece just mentioned it in passing, but today, four days later the BBC ran a major news item on the issue (see below).

I found it incredible at the time and I find it even more incredible now that serious questions are not being asked by the media. How come virtually at the beginning of the catastrophe, with the airport barely functioning and/or crowded with planes, one hundred or so 'orphans' were whipped out, apparently to the US and Holland? The operation was surely pre-planned, how could it be otherwise?[4]

Yet the thefts continue with European countries cueing up to get their share of 'orphans'. And it seems judging by the overall tone of the BBC's piece, it doesn't see anything wrong with idea. However, others are less sanguine:

"Bringing children into the US either by airlift or new adoption during a time of national emergency can open the door for fraud, abuse and trafficking" — Joint Council on International Children's Services, a US advocacy group

"Orphan children charity, SOS Children's Villages, has condemned media reports claiming that Haiti could be left with one million orphaned children as a result of the recent earthquake.

"SOS, the world's largest orphaned children charity, says that the figures are massively exaggerated to generate big headlines and irresponsible as it presents a false impression of the real needs on the ground.

"SOS claims that providing for every orphaned child is possible and inflating the numbers can lead to orphaned children being unnecessarily removed from an area before extended families and best interests can be considered.

"The charity cites a similar over-reaction by the media to the Asian Tsunami in 2004 when reports were published of over 1.5 million affected children, "most orphans", whereas the final total was around 5,000." — ['SOS CONDEMNS MEDIA SENSATIONALISM OVER INFLATED HAITI ORPHAN 'CRISIS'](#), 19 January, 2010[5]

It seems Black Haitian babies are okay to 'import' to no doubt loving parents but not when they're all grown up and able to make their own way there, as the cordon sanitaire being assembled around Haiti shows.[6]

Notes

1. One writer accused the major media of commandeering scarce resources (see ['Journalists hindering Haiti relief?'](#)) but I think it's wide off the mark.
2. [No, Mister! You Cannot Share My Pain!](#) by John Maxwell, Black Agenda Report, 20 January, 2010
3. See for example, ['Haiti's Robespierre: The Tragedy of Toussaint L'Ouverture'](#) By BJÖRN KUMM
4. See ['Orphaned Haitian children to be allowed into US'](#), BBC News Website, 19 January, 2010
5. See the Daily Mail's hysterical pronouncement, ['Crisis of the one million Haitian orphans as Unicef warns the devastation has jumped to 'unbearable proportions''](#), blown up a couple more notches no doubt by this typical Daily Mail piece which tells us "[A]id groups fear as many as one million more on the island have been left without one or both parents following

the last week's devastating earthquake." One assumes that one million orphans represents 1 million dead parents or is that two million dead parents?

6. "The unprecedented air, land and sea operation, dubbed "Vigilant Sentry", was launched as a senior US official compared Haiti's destruction to the aftermath of nuclear warfare.

"It is the same as if an atomic bomb had been exploded," said Kenneth Merten, America's ambassador to Port-au-Prince, as officials estimated the numbers of those killed by last weeks earthquake to over 200,000." — '[Haiti earthquake: US ships blockade coast to thwart exodus to America](#)', Daily Telegraph, 19 January, 2010

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