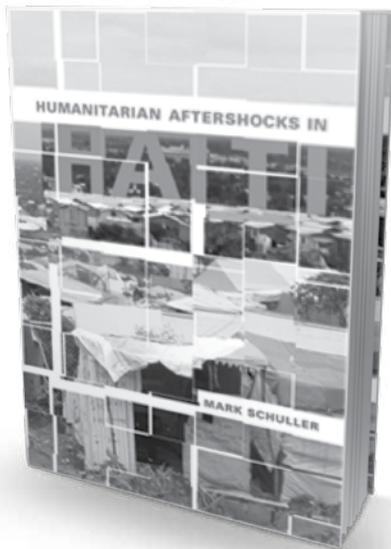


BOOK REVIEW

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HAITI: A TALE OF TWO DISASTERS



HUMANITARIAN AFTERSHOCKS IN HAITI.

Mark Schuller, New Brunswick, Canada: Rutgers University Press, 312p.

We could compare the story told in “Humanitarian Aftershocks in Haiti”, by Mark Schuller, to a classic Greek tragedy. In a deep sense, it is the story of how Haiti and its people cannot seem to escape their fate, as if destined to endless poverty and suffering despite their best efforts. It is also a tragedy in the sense that it is a story that constantly shows up throughout development and humanitarian history. Over the past 50 or 60 years, we have been told repeatedly, after every humanitarian crisis or development effort, that the key to a successful intervention is to listen to locals, to empower them and to effectively engage them in the planning and governance of development projects. Both practitioners’ manuals and academic papers and books seem to agree on this analysis. Yet, in almost every new setting, we seem to forget these lessons and make the same mistakes, as if Sisyphus had been the chairman of the World Bank or UNDP all along.

The book goes to great lengths to show us the setting, the characters, the plot and its consequences. The setting, of course, is Haiti, which suffered a devastating earthquake that killed at least 100,000 people in 2010. The many characters of the tragedy include the Haitian people, NGO workers, government representatives and worldwide aid leaders, but mostly the so-called IDPs – Internally Displaced Persons: Haitians that have lost everything and been relocated to temporary camps. Finally, the plot shows how the negative impacts of the natural disaster have been greatly amplified by social, political, cultural and institutional issues that challenge Haiti and its relationship with foreign powers. This explains the title of the book: after an earthquake comes the aftershocks, that is, other minor quakes that result from the first one. In this case, we delve deep into the shocks that resulted from failures in the humanitarian response to the natural disaster.

The book is important, firstly, for the sheer numbers and challenges posed by the earthquake: over 100,000 deaths, almost 300,000 destroyed or badly damaged homes, 500,000 displaced people and U\$ 16 billion promised in aid. It is also very relevant as it gives voice to those directly affected by the situation, including many poignant testimonies and using Creole words and local idioms to paint a vivid picture of the country, its people and its culture.

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After a brief introduction, chapter 1 presents the context of the tragedy: Haiti's history and the many challenges it has faced over the last 200 years. It helps us understand how the country is especially vulnerable to suffering damage from earthquakes – disasters of a similar magnitude in other countries have been much less deadly than the one felt in Port-au-Prince, Haiti's capital. According to the author, the blame falls mostly on a combination of colonialism, imperialism, capitalism, neoliberalism and inequality; such are the forces that hinder Haiti's development.

Chapters 2 to 5 present us with the Haitian victims. Chapter 2 focuses on the IDPs, referred to as *deplase* (the displaced) in Creole. This is a compelling example of the power of social categories to have real effect: "Being labeled an IDP was a form of 'social death', ostracism from Haitian society and annulment of full humanity". The chapter also shows the range of narratives that exist when talking about the victims, from touching cases of solidarity and resilience to more problematic cases of violence and misery (a kind of "dog-eat-dog" reality). The world's media generally prefers the latter to the former, reinforcing the dehumanizing interpretation.

Chapter 3 focuses on the impacts of being relocated to a camp on people's livelihoods and families, further weakening social and cultural bonds that were already severely impacted by the earthquake. Women were especially vulnerable to these effects, as argued in Chapter 4; many of the policies designed to protect them had unintended consequences that caused more harm than good. The reasons for these problems are partly explained in Chapter 5, which details how the Camp Committees were established and how they ended up being transformed into hierarchical, male-dominated entities that often resorted to violence and power abuse.

Chapters 6 to 8 shed light on a different set of characters: NGOs (Chapters 6 and 7) and the aid system as a whole (Chapter 8). Haiti is sometimes referred to as the "Republic of NGOs", not only because international nonprofit organizations are there in great numbers but also because the locals feel that NGOs have more power than the local government. These chapters discuss the diversity of this reality, showing how good and bad NGOs coexist. One of the major points of this debate is the sentiment expressed by the phrase *Aba ONG Volè*, meaning "down with NGO thieves": are NGOs profiting from the misery of others? Chapter 7 discusses a specific form of theft: many international NGOs have recruited Haitian workers, paying them much less than their foreign colleagues and leaders. Many of these workers have felt that aid expatriates have generally ignored their local knowledge and abilities, which has led to many avoidable mistakes. Chapter 8 takes these issues to a higher level, describing

why the system of international aid and development is prone to shortcomings, due to poor coordination, competition for funding, lack of respect for locals, and excessive emphasis on public relations: as disaster aid feeds off media coverage, it can lead to a "just do something" attitude. The book's brief Conclusion focuses on lessons that can be learned, a reconciliation with recent development literature and some recommendations regarding an ideal new kind of humanitarianism, based fundamentally on respect for the victims and locals.

In short, the book shows the challenges involved in regulating the behavior of international aid actors when dealing with catastrophic events occurring in so-called weak states such as Haiti. The author points to the many economic, cultural and social factors that limit the locals' potential to influence international NGOs, development agencies and the transnational aid system in general. In this sense, both individuals and organizations in Haiti are in a weak position to counterbalance the failures of the international governance imposed upon them.

This book is particularly relevant to three potential kinds of reader. The first includes anyone interested in knowing more about Haiti and the disaster, in much more detail than is provided by other sources, such as the press. More significantly, it allows the reader to empathize with the IDPs and the Haitian people, as well as finding alternative narratives to certain paternalistic clichés that are often used, such as, "Haiti is a poor country that cannot do without our help" or "Haitians are lazy people who cannot get back on their feet despite our donations".

The second kind of reader includes anyone who is studying or working in the field of development and humanitarian issues. It painstakingly documents mistakes made by the international aid complex and the unintentional consequences of these mistakes, showing how they affect the very same people that they are trying to help. The few success stories that are in the text point to alternative paths and practices that should be emphasized in future endeavors.

The third reader to whom this book should appeal is anyone in the academia who wishes to reflect on the challenges of carrying out critical research in difficult settings, using both qualitative and quantitative approaches. While there is no comprehensive "methods and data" section, the book openly portrays the research trajectory through stories and discussions. These show the challenges of being a *blan* (a white person, a foreigner) trying to intrude into the very complex and often desperate realities of the IDPs. Many ethical research dilemmas, with no clear adequate answer or procedure, are discussed throughout the book and are invaluable to discussions at research seminars or in methodology classes.