

'Benighted' Journalists Assail Haiti

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By Joe Emersberger

Decent people in North America have tried to help Haitians after the devastating earthquake that struck on January 12, but the corporate media have left them unequipped to do one of the most helpful things they can do - oppose their governments' efforts to inflict more harm on the victims under the cover of disaster relief. If it seems paranoid to claim that Canada and the U.S. will use the earthquake to further set back development and democracy, it is only because the criminal role they have played in Haiti has been very effectively hidden.

The Economics of Mass Murder

German playwright Bertolt Brecht wrote that "In democratic countries the violent character inherent in the economy doesn't show itself; in authoritarian countries the same holds for the economic character of the violence"[1]

With Brecht's words in mind, consider that under the dictatorship of Jean Claude Duvalier ("Baby Doc"), Haiti became the ninth largest assembler of manufactured goods for the U.S. market. His regime kept wages attractively low for foreign investors through mass murder. By the mid 1980s wages were also kept low through the destruction of Haiti's agricultural economy. U.S. imports began to flood the Haitian market, ruining its farmers and driving them into urban areas, especially Port-au-Prince, in search of any work they could find. The mass exodus from the countryside also led people to live in shantytowns where they are vulnerable to the impact of hurricanes and earthquakes. [2]

The Duvalier regimes were responsible for the murder of about 50,000 people. That does not include those who died preventable deaths from malnutrition and disease as a direct result of policies designed to enrich a small Haitian elite and foreign multinationals such as Disney.[3]

The Duvalierist model of "development" eventually generated so much opposition within Haiti that it became unsustainable. In 1986, Baby Doc fled Haiti. In 1990 Jean Bertrand Aristide won Haiti's first free elections. Though the Duvaliers were gone, "Duvalierism without Duvalier" has been the objective of Haitian elite and their foreign allies since 1990. Lavalas, Aristide's movement of the poor, despite its modest objectives, posed a serious threat to Duvalierism.

Twice, in 1991 and 2004, democratically elected governments in Haiti led by Aristide have been overthrown in U.S. backed coups that led to the murder of thousands of his supporters. U.S. governments (and their allies in Canada and France who helped out

with the 2004 coup) are much like the Mafia. The Godfather has long decided that Haiti will offer some of the world's lowest wages to multinational corporations like Disney, Levi Strauss and Gildan Activewear. Haiti may be the smallest shopkeeper in the U.S. neighbourhood, but no competent Mafia Don lets the smallest shopkeeper defy him. [4]

Burying the Past and the Present

It is impossible to rationally assess foreign intervention in Haiti - present or future - without discussing the two coups against Aristide's governments in 1991 and 2004. With numerous ideas being floated in the press about how to "fix", "rebuild" and even "re-imagine" Haiti, it's instructive to look at how often the coups were mentioned in articles written after the earthquake.

Between January 12 and February 6, according to Lexis Nexis, the words "Aristide" and "coup" appear in only 6.4% of the articles about Haiti in the major English newspapers (8% in the case of Canada's five largest newspapers). None of the articles that mention "Aristide" and "coup" in Canada's major newspapers were editorials. In contrast, two editorials (in the Globe & Mail, January 14 and Montreal Gazette, January 16) approvingly mentioned Paul Collier, a World Bank economist and leading proponent of the Duvalierist economic policies described above. Collier has written:

"Haiti has labor costs that are fully competitive with China, which is the global benchmark. Haitian labor is not only cheap, it is of good quality. Indeed, because **the garments industry used to be much larger than it is currently** [my emphasis], there is a substantial pool of experienced labor." [5]

Just don't ask how wages will be kept appalling low or how they got that way. Collier's cheerleaders in the press ignore the violence that has always been required in Haiti for Collier's--- hardly novel and untested--- "suggestions" to be implemented.

Even those rare articles that mentioned the coups against Aristide usually regurgitated the version of events offered by the U.S. and Canadian governments. A good example of the standard whitewash appeared in an article written by Geoffrey York for the Toronto Globe and Mail ("Exiled Aristide bidding to come home", January 16, 2010). [6]

I wrote to Geoffrey York about his article and pointed out facts that, judging by his article, he was completely unaware of. York replied, and a lengthier exchange ensued than I have ever had with a corporate journalist.

The full exchange can be read here

<http://canuckmediamonitor.org/forums/index.php?showtopic=325>

One of the things York said in defense of his work was that "brevity" forced him to leave things out. This is how York summarized recent Haitian history in his article:

"He was elected president in a landslide victory in 1990, but was overthrown in a military coup in 1991. After years of exile in Venezuela and the United States, he was reinstated to power in 1994 with the help of heavy pressure from the U.S. government, including the deployment of 20,000 troops.

In 2000, he won election again, but human-rights groups criticized his campaign for using violence and intimidation. Opposition parties boycotted the election and refused to recognize his victory.

Over the next four years his government was plagued by protests against human-rights abuses, corruption, economic woes and high unemployment. His armed supporters were accused of attacking journalists and political opponents.

The anti-government protests intensified in 2004 and turned violent, and Mr. Aristide was forced to flee the country. He later complained that he was 'kidnapped' and bundled onto a U.S. airplane by U.S. security agents. He was flown to the Central African Republic and later to South Africa, where the government gave him a villa in Pretoria."

Using an equal number of words (just as much "brevity") Geoffrey York could have written the following:

"In 1990, after decades of dictatorship bankrolled by Washington, Haitians voted in their first free presidential election. The winner, Jean Bertrand Aristide, was quickly deposed in a U.S. backed coup. Bill Clinton ordered the regime to resign in 1994 but insisted that Aristide's years in exile count as years served in office and that Aristide implement policies favoured by the Haitian elite. Clinton ensured that perpetrators of the coup escaped justice or remained employed in Haiti's security forces.

From 1995-2002, the U.S. spent \$70 million dollars strengthening Aristide's opponents. Aristide was re-elected in 2000. His opponents used the international media to spread baseless allegations of electoral fraud, human rights abuses and corruption. The U.S. and Canada imposed a crippling aid embargo. Aristide says he was kidnapped by U.S. troops in 2004. The U.S. blocked efforts by the Caribbean Community and the African Union to bring about an investigation. During 2004-2006, under a U.S. (and Canadian) backed dictatorship, thousands of Aristide's supporters were murdered."

No doubt, the need for brevity forces a reporter to oversimplify things, to leave out supporting facts and arguments that, ideally, would be included. For example, among other things, the two preceding paragraphs do not say enough about Canada's complicity with the 2004 coup. Canadian troops secured the airport as U.S. troops took Aristide out of Haiti. Canada oversaw the Haitian judiciary as it filled Haitian jails with political prisoners. A Canadian government funded "human rights group" (RNDDH) spearheaded the campaign to criminalize any association with Aristide's government.
[7]

However, the need for brevity (in and of itself) does not force anyone to regurgitate

government spin. This is trivially obvious, but anyone who has corresponded with journalists knows that "brevity", "concision", or "lack of space" is constantly invoked by journalists as an excuse for parroting establishment views.

Geoffrey York also pointed out to me that he is based in Johannesburg and covers sub-Saharan Africa after spending years in China and Russia. This is very important because it means his research about Haiti consisted of reviewing corporate press reports. It would have been miraculous if York had written otherwise – putting aside other constraints – **if he relied on the corporate media.**

There are a few corporate journalists who have broken with the pack in their reporting on Haiti. Two examples, which I pointed out to York, are Andrew Buncombe and Andy Kershaw of the UK Independent. Their work stands apart because they've looked beyond establishment-friendly sources for information, but their work is so rare that anyone would almost have to know about it in advance in order to find it. Even the liberal newspaper Buncombe and Kershaw work for has taken editorial positions as blinkered and reactionary as one can find in the right wing press - virtually applauding the coup in Haiti in 2004 and openly cheering the one in Honduras in 2009. [8]

Another one of the few articles to mention coups against Aristide was one written by Peggy Curran for the Montréal Gazette ("How Haiti Lost its Way", January 30). Curran's article was over three thousand words long, so brevity would be an especially feeble excuse for her distortions of history.

She wrote about the brutality of the Duvaliers but not about the crucial support they received from the U.S. She even cast the Reaganites as heroes who pressured Jean Claude Duvalier to flee Haiti in 1986. The U.S. did finally cut Duvalier loose - and immediately transferred support to his military henchmen. In the first year after Duvalier fled, the Haitian military government, generously funded by the U.S., openly killed more protestors than Jean Claude Duvalier did in fifteen years.[9]

Of the 1991 coup, Curran merely wrote that Aristide was "returned to power with the help of U.S. troops in 1994 after his first term was interrupted for three years."

The three year "interruption" was a bloodbath sponsored by the U.S. that left 4000 people murdered, thousands tortured, and hundreds of thousands driven into hiding. Emmanuel Constant, one of the key ringleaders, was on the CIA payroll and was protected from deportation to Haiti for years by the Clinton Administration. [10]

Curran wrote of the 2004 coup which deposed Aristide's second government:

"...he, too, would be forced to flee, scuttled onto a plane to nowhere, one more in a dismal succession of failed leaders and abusive, discredited régimes in a land seemingly forever doomed by its past."

If her characterization of Aristide were accurate then Rene Preval's electoral victory in

2006 is impossible to explain. Preval was not part of the U.S. and Canadian funded opposition to Aristide. Preval's candidacy was violently opposed by supporters of the coup, and, in contrast, endorsed by prominent Aristide allies such as the late Father Gerard Jean-Juste, and applauded by Aristide himself.[11]

I made many of these points in an email I sent to Peggy Curran. She did not reply.

Securing Disaster and Reviving Colonialism

Yves Engler, a Canadian writer and activist, recently pointed out that Haiti now has more foreign troops on its soil per square mile than Afghanistan or Iraq. [12] There is no war going on, but if these troops were providing effective assistance to the victims of the earthquake, then their presence could be justified. The reality is that the militarized relief effort has been a disgrace.

First-hand accounts by independent journalists (Kevin Pina, Amy Goodman, Ansel Herz), other independent observers (Bill Quigley, Timothy Schwartz) and even some corporate journalists (Mark Doyle of the BBC) have exposed the relief efforts as "pathetic" (Doyle's evaluation). Peter Hallward, in his essay entitled "Securing Disaster", thoroughly reviewed the evidence that justifies this assessment. [13]

As Hallward and others have argued, while the militarized relief effort has done little for the victims, it could help deal with "the ever-nagging threat of popular political participation and empowerment".

Corporate pundits have not been shy about calling for direct foreign control over Haiti. The Economist stated boldly that "Some will object that this would undermine a democratically elected government. But there is not much left to undermine." [14]

The U.S. occupied Haiti from 1915-1934. Future trampling of Haitian sovereignty will require historical editing of that occupation. Right on cue, Peter Shawn Taylor, an editor-at-large of the Canadian magazine, *Macleans*, stepped forward with the article "What we can learn from the U.S. Occupation of Haiti." (Globe and Mail, February 1)

Taylor wrote that the U.S. occupation was a "golden era" in Haitian history which "provides a convenient frame of reference for what the rest of the world can expect as it tries to rebuild the benighted country." For readers who will have to look up the word "benighted" (as I did), it means "to be in a state of intellectual, moral, or social darkness". Like all apologists for the U.S. occupation, Taylor raved about the building of roads and other infrastructure.

I wrote to Taylor, pointing to facts his article ignored completely.

My full correspondence with Taylor may be seen here:

<http://canuckmediamonitor.org/forums/index.php?showtopic=341>

The infrastructure Taylor wrote about was built by reinstating the "corvee" (slave labour) which had not been used since 1863. U.S. troops and their Haitian collaborators killed 3,000 to 15,000 Caco rebels in order to pacify the country (while sustaining only about 98 killed and wounded themselves). Some historians say the death toll for Haitians was higher. North American firms grabbed 266,000 acres of Haitian land by robbing 50,000 peasants of their land in the north of Haiti alone. The U.S. occupation also left behind the modernized Haitian army which would effectively continue the U.S. occupation after it officially ended. [15]

Taylor replied to me by saying that:

"...the 'Golden Era' for Haiti to which I was referring was in regard to the amount of infrastructure built during the U.S. occupation".

He made no attempt to explain his silence about slave labor or about the killing and dispossession of tens of thousands of Haitians. He wrote that he had been "thinking of mentioning your point about the gendarmerie [the Haitian army], but ran out of space."

He ended his reply by asking:

"Can you suggest any time period in which more rapid development and modernization occurred in Haitian history?"

I answered his question as follows:

"Yes, under democratic rule between 1994-2000 more schools were built in Haiti than between 1804-1994. By 2003, literacy campaigns reduced the illiteracy rate from 85% to 55%., infant mortality declined from 125 deaths per 1000 to 110. The Haitian army was abolished. All of that just scratches the surface of what was achieved despite the efforts of the U.S. over this period (with Canada's enthusiastic help over the past several years) to crush democracy in Haiti." [16]

I asked Taylor why he didn't look at what Haitians achieved when they had a limited opportunity to govern themselves - and suggest that era, rather than the U.S. occupation, as the template for moving forward.

He wrote back:

"With respect to which period of time has seen more development in Haiti, I think we are at a stalemate. You cite some impressive evidence on building schools from a pro-Aristide group document, however even this paper shows that the American-era saw the construction of more hospitals and clinics.."

Taylor closed by saying:

"You may disagree with my perspective, but again, that is a matter of opinion."

I replied again:

"I don't see a 'stalemate' when you consider that between 1994-2003 the Haitian governments (under both Aristide and Preval) were freely elected and did not resort to the murder and dispossession of tens of thousands of people or to the use of slave labour - all of which the U.S. did during the occupation.

It is shocking to have to make this point - again - to a writer in the 21st century with access to a large audience.

It comes down to values. A writer who glorifies a brutal occupation through lies of omission does not appear to value basic human rights or democracy."

Actually, it's possible that Peter Shawn Taylor does value human rights and democracy - just not for Haitians. That's an attitude that has proven to be quite prevalent in the corporate media.

SUGGESTED ACTION(S)

1) If you haven't already, make a donation to one of the relief organizations recommended by the Canada Haiti Action Network (CHAN)

<http://canadahaitiaction.ca/>

2) Send polite, non-abusive emails to the following:
(copy all letters and replies to Joe@canuckmediamonitor.org)

Peggy Curran
pcurran@thegazette.canwest.com

Montreal Gazette:
letters@thegazette.canwest.com

Toronto Star
lettertoed@thestar.ca

Toronto Globe & Mail
letters@GlobeAndMail.ca

3) Forward this alert far and wide

NOTES

[1] cited by Eduardo Galeano in, *Open Veins of Latin America: Five Centuries of the Pillage of a Continent*, Monthly Review Press, N.Y., 1973, pg. 274.

[2] see Paul Farmer, *The Uses of Haiti*, Common Courage Press, Monroe Maine, 1994. Page 99, 291; also Peter Hallward's *Damming the Flood: Haiti, Aristide and the Politics of Containment*, Penguin, Toronto, 2008; pages 5,6.

[3] See Peter Hallward, "Option Zero in Haiti," *New Left Review*, No. 27, May-June 2004.

<http://www.zcommunications.org/option-zero...-peter-hallward>

[4] The Haiti as small shopkeeper analogy was used by Noam Chomsky in this 2007 interview

<http://www.haitianalysis.com/2007/1/15/god...homsky-on-haiti>

[5] Haiti: From Natural Catastrophe to Economic Security: A Report for the Secretary-General of the United Nations, Paul Collier, Department of Economics, Oxford University, January 2009. In Haiti, the menu of policies Collier advocates have, for decades, been derided as the "death plan".

[6] Rick Salutin and Gerald Caplan wrote articles mentioning U.S. wrong- doing in Haiti. Caplan's was quite hard hitting ("Some facts Stephen Harper should have on Haiti, *Globe & Mail*", February 5, 2010) but both Caplan and Salutin said nothing about Canada's deep complicity with the U.S.

Janet Bagnall of the *Montreal Gazette* took the same approach. My brief exchange with Bagnall is below:

<http://canuckmediamonitor.org/forums/index.php?showtopic=339>

Other correspondence with Canadian journalists about Haiti and other topics may be read here:

<http://canuckmediamonitor.org/forums/index.php?showforum=6>

[7] See *Canada in Haiti: Waging war on the poor majority*, by Yves Engler and Anthony Fenton, Fernwood Publishing, Halifax, 2006.

[8] Andrew Buncombe, "Discovered by Columbus, built by France – and wrecked by dictators"

<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/am...rs-1869513.html>

Andy Kershaw; "Stop treating these people like savages."

<http://www.independent.co.uk/opinion/comme...es-1874218.html>

Independent Editorial; "At Last, The U.S. joins France to send Forces to Haiti", March 1, 2004

Independent Editorial; "Guns and Democracy" June 30, 2009

[9] See pg 109,110 of Paul Farmer's "Uses of Haiti"

[10] See my exchange with Geoffrey York for sources and discussion of HRW's reporting on Haiti

<http://canuckmediamonitor.org/forums/index.php?showtopic=325>

[11] On Father Gerard Jean-Juste's endorsement of Preval see

AP: February 6, 2006 Monday "Haitian priest urges vote for Preval in Haiti election."

See also Hallward's interview with Aristide in "Damming the Flood."

[12] Yves Engler made the point at the following talk <http://www.cctv.org/watch-tv/programs/cata...atural-disaster>

[13] Kevin Pina's reports from Haiti may be accessed here:

<http://www.flashpoints.net/>

Blog reports from Haiti by Ansel Haerz may be accessed here

<http://www.mediahacker.org/>

For Amy Goodman's reports see

http://www.democracynow.org/2010/1/19/hait...ken_to_the_core

See Hallward; "Securing Disaster" for other sources:

<http://www.zcommunications.org/securing-disaster-in-haiti-by-peter-hallward>

[14] (Economist, January 23, A plan for Haiti: After the earthquake)

[15] See "Uses of Haiti" pg 82-85; "Damming the Flood" pg 14

[16] The source I cited about the 1994-2003 era in my exchange with Taylor was the following

<http://www.teledyol.net/WWNF/wnnf.pdf>