

Apocalypse Now

THOUSANDS OF HAITIANS, with arms outstretched towards heaven, have been praying for deliverance at impromptu gatherings amid the stinking corpse-strewn wreckage of Port-au-Prince and other towns across the country. Praying, singing, and calling for divine assistance, from morn till night. They may be praying to a number of different deities disguised as a melange of assorted Christian saints, all subordinate to Bondaye, the unreachable Creator. Or, they may be devout Roman Catholics or right-thinking Born Again Christians, who insist upon rejecting their ancestral religion in favour of an 'authorised' relationship with God. Whichever it is they will disavow dishonour and greed and promote love and generosity.

Despite, the psychotic musings of the Reverend Pat Robertson, the people of Haiti have demonstrated the most remarkable solidarity in the teeth of catastrophe. In the face of truly apocalyptic scenes men and women dressed only in t-shirts, jeans, and sandals, have been scrambling over the ruins attempting to rescue people from the rubble of collapsed buildings. They have organized themselves into makeshift teams in order to collect, bury, or burn the corpses piling up in the streets.

Inevitably, this solidarity and spontaneous initiative will be threatened and then overwhelmed by exhaustion, desperation and misery. They cannot make headway against seemingly endless heaps of broken concrete and numberless decaying corpses. Neither the prayers of the people nor their extraordinary solidarity will make much of an impression on the chaos. Only the Americans can save them.

Only the American army and navy has the capacity to overcome the disintegration of Haiti's physical and

social infrastructure; only the White House and the Pentagon has the ability to open the way for a multitude of aid agencies to bring in food, water, medicines, and tents. Only American imperialism can provide a semblance of order that will save most of the survivors from epidemic diseases, dehydration, and starvation. This is the bitter truth.

In the face of this grim reality, and within hours of the earthquake, the Anti-Capitalist press and blogosphere was commenting on the dispatch of troops, an aircraft carrier, and US coastguard vessels. "More troops than aid!" they cried as they readied the backroom boys and girls to hurriedly run articles giving us chapter and verse of Haiti's appalling history at the hands of everybody from French planters to American bankers. Their focus has been on the grisly history of oppression and exploitation as they luxuriate in another great opportunity to rehearse and rehash, once again, the crimes of slavery and imperialism.

The truth of this narrative is not in doubt. The successful revolt of 1791 in which the slaves murdered as many French planters as they could lay their hands on, and in which, a dozen years later, they decisively defeated the colonial armies sent against them, earned them the undying enmity of slave holders and colonialists. The people of Haiti made a pact not with the Devil, but with freedom, and for this there has been no forgiveness or redemption.

The destruction of the plantation economy resulted in attempts to reintroduce servitude in the form of a kind of serfdom in order to develop the economy of the country, but all to no avail. The subsistence farming of small family plots was to dominate agriculture and this, together with the perpetual struggle to pay the interest to New York bankers on loans raised to compensate the French, guaranteed the downward spiral of the country. Deforestation for timber exports and cooking fires resulted in the degradation of the soil and widespread erosion, which has increased the vulnerability of the country to drought and flooding. This course together with the

destruction and the losses of livestock associated with tropical storms has recently accelerated uncontrolled migration to Port-au-Prince in a process, which without significant economic development is simply unsustainable.

Throughout this long history the powers, France, Spain, Britain and the United States have been determined, at first to guarantee the sanctity of slavery, and subsequently, to insist upon the sanctity of 'service' to the 'debt'. Haiti must, at all costs, pay the interest on her debts. The costs have indeed been high; Haitians have endured tyrannical monarchs, sinister dictatorships, American occupation, and finally, 'stabilization' by the troops of the United Nations.

Now, last week's earthquake has resulted in the collapse of the Haitian state. The presidential palace, the police headquarters, the tax and revenue office has collapsed, even the semblance of Haitian independence has collapsed; the country has become a *de facto* colony or protectorate of the United States. No doubt somebody will rapidly throw a UN flag over the operation, but everybody will know that plenipotentiaries endorsed by the White House will rule Haiti for some years to come.

The opening moves of this colonial process could be seen at the Airport at Port-au-Prince last week when Hilary Rodham Clinton received the Haitian President for talks on unravelling the chaos. American troops are on the ground and there are warships and coastguard vessels in the bay. The troops have not got the aid in fast enough, there will be logistical foul ups, people who should have been saved will die in the confusion; American soldiers will be seen rounding up looters, perhaps even firing on rioters, they will become the focus for the discontent of the survivors. This much is certain.

All this will feed the old well-oiled account of imperialist barbarism beloved of the Socialist press and blogosphere. Of alternatives we will hear little, apart from pious expressions of belief in the capacity

of 'the masses', or 'the working class', to solve all problems, and self-organize their way to independence and freedom. This will, of course, be nonsense, but it will be anti-American nonsense, and will thus warm the hearts of many on the left, as they are able to point to yet another example of Yankee misrule.

The bitter truth is, however, that the Haitian people will have to rely upon America to orchestrate the delivery of emergency aid and relief, and in the weeks and months to come, they will have to rely on the Americans to help get the docks, roads, bridges, power plants, and hospitals back in working order. Americans will need to put the country's institutions back on their feet and reconstruct the state from the ground up.

This is where the real problems of American colonial rule will come to the fore. If the reconstruction of Iraq and Afghanistan are anything to go by, 'nation building' and 'development' are not their strong suits. To a certainty there will be a belief in the exclusive virtues of free enterprise, and lavish support for those surviving elements of the Haitian elite committed to lining their pockets at the expense of everybody else. The need for a strong state, capable of serious economic planning and social and physical reconstruction will be undermined by the reluctance of American politicians and planners to move much beyond first aid and policing.

This is where the Anti-Capitalist movement needs to do some quick and radical thinking. Just as the Haitian's will have to engage with American power, so the progressive movement should engage with American power, by developing a series of concrete demands about the rebuilding of Port-au-Prince, the long-term development of the country, the reforestation of its hillsides and mountains, and the development of democratic institutions. Campaigns that insist that America does the right thing are what are needed now, not a focus on its historic crimes and manifest failings.