The MILITARISATION of AID as an ACT of RELIGIOUS VIOLENCE

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The Imperial Order of Things is Universal

> Law and morality also have their place in the empire in that they define a *universal* necessity of the relationship of each thing with the others. But the power of morality remains foreign to the system based on external violence. Morality only touches this system at the border where law is integrated. And the connection between the one and the other is the middle term by which one goes from the empire to the outside, from the outside to the empire.[1]

In the depths of the night a rasping cry pierced the core of my sleep. A strangely musical note remained, reverberating between the buildings beyond my window. It was a call made to travel far, to pass through walls: the sound of a solitary fox calling for kin.

Fully awake now, I listened to the calls and waited for a reply.

Silence.

> The disaster is related to forgetfulness—forgetfulness without memory, the motionless retreat of what has not been treated—the immemorial perhaps. To remember forgetfully: again, the outside.[2]

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I first had the impulse to write this text shortly after the earthquake that devastated Haiti on 12 January 2010. My initial intention was to analyse the militarisation of aid in post-earthquake Haiti from the perspective of Georges Bataille's *Theory of Religion*. I imagined I could write an exegesis on Bataille's thesis that would illuminate the concealed religious violence of neo-colonial, militaristic humanitarianism in post-disaster situations.

Three weeks earlier I had participated in the first Ghetto Biennale, organised by an artists' community in the Grand Rue area of Port-au-Prince. I had been invited to give a paper on the theme of 'Of Revolution and Revelation' at the conference that accompanied the event and had chosen to explain my reasons for being there. My journey began with a childhood fascination with horror films, developed through an encounter with the writings of Bataille, to an interest in Mesmerism as the source of anxieties about the effects of mass media on 'suggestible' populations, a line of enquiry that led eventually to Haiti due to the bizarre claim made by Anton Mesmer, at the end of his life, that the introduction of animal-magnetism (the name he gave to the therapeutic practice he created) to Saint Domingue, had eventually led to the Haitian revolution, after the slaves mistakenly confused it with sorcery. The tale eventually formed a spiral through the idea—personified in *Acéphale,* the secret society founded by Bataille in the late 1930s—that an act of ritual sacrifice could trigger an unleashing of contagious, revolutionary force. This, I had discovered, was what had happened at Bois Caiman, the legendary ceremony that gave rise to the Haitian revolution in 1791.

In the immediate aftermath of the earthquake, the word 'exigency', which I had read many times in the writings of Bataille and Maurice Blanchot, but had not understood beyond the intellectual issue of those texts, acquired new meanings. 'Suddenly' the 'immediate urgency' of the situation in Haiti was making 'impossible' demands of the kind, I now understood, that compelled Bataille to write *Theory of Religion*.

> This condition of impossibility is not an excuse for undeniable deficiencies; it limits all real philosophy. The scientist is he who *agrees* to wait. The philosopher himself waits, but he cannot do so legitimately. Philosophy responds from the start to an irresolvable exigency. No one can 'be' independently of the response to the question that it raises.[3]

Two years after, those demands pressed heavily upon me, and still the text remained unwritten. Were there not more practical things to do? To be of *real* assistance, rather than labouring a philosophical exegesis that would be of practical use to no one. Good work was being done. Colleagues joined together in solidarity with the people of Haiti, raised money, sent it, raised awareness, shared it. The lives of people we knew were marginally improved by our efforts. Three weeks after the earthquake and still no official aid had been seen by the majority of the population. Grand Rue, a relatively impoverished neighbourhood, had received little of what meagre aid was being distributed. We knew from Haitian grass-roots organisations that aid pledged to the major charities would probably never reach the Haitian people, so we were telling as many people as possible to send money directly to them.

Returning to the reports of the immediate aftermath is disheartening. Despite the massive outpourings of popular charity, the planned delivery of billions of dollars of humanitarian aid, and the blanket media coverage of Haiti's trauma, little has changed for the better. In many ways the situation is more hopeless. One sensed this at the time, this feeling of a double-urgency: the urgency of the immediate need, and the memory of all the need that had gone unanswered before. Many of us hoped that such a spectacular catastrophe might make people in the wider world aware at last of the slow economic disaster that has been happening since Haiti won its independence from France in 1804. But as soon as the global media turned its attention to the next disaster, war zone or natural catastrophe, Haiti was once more returned to the geo-political obscurity that characterises most of the planet on which we live.

On top of the immediate necessity to give and facilitate assistance in any way we could, there soon arrived another, equally pressing exigency: the necessity to alert people about the counter-humanitarian role of the US military in the unfolding crisis.

The centrepiece of President Obama's 'swift, coordinated and aggressive effort to save lives' in the immediate aftermath of the earthquake was to send 14,000 US troops to 'secure the disaster'.[4] The city was informally separated into green zones (where aid workers could go about their work unimpeded) and red zones (such as Grand Rue) in which they were required to be accompanied by military security, a model developed in Baghdad during the Iraq war and transposed to New Orleans following Hurricane Katrina.[5] After a week on the ground in Haiti, USAID reported that, after airlifting US and European survivors to safety, their search and rescue teams had managed to save a total of seventy people.[6]

> As soon as the US air force took control of Haitian airspace, on Wednesday 13 January, they explicitly prioritised military over humanitarian flights. Although most reports from Port-au-Prince emphasised remarkable levels of patience and solidarity on the streets, US commanders made fears of popular unrest and insecurity their number one concern.[7]

That the actions of the US government were covertly anti-humanitarian was obvious to those familiar with the history of US involvement in Haiti. They would also have recognised the bitter irony of Obama's invitation to two former US presidents to establish the Clinton-Bush Haiti Fund. This looked ominously like the US was gearing up for an exercise of neo-imperialist disaster capitalism. The actions of the US government added an extra weight of hopelessness to what was already an appalling and desperate situation. Despite the massive donations of charity, and the

'humanitarian assistance' of the US military, for hundreds of thousands of sick, malnourished, injured, homeless and traumatised citizens of Haiti, life has not changed for the better. Their lot is in many ways worse.[8]

Distance and Proximity

Perhaps the intensity of my reactions was in part due to personal relations to people in the 'disaster zone'. In a lecture given by Susan Buck-Morss, shortly after the earthquake, she showed images of victims being pulled from the rubble and spoke candidly about her reactions to them.[9] In the discussion that followed, someone in the audience challenged her for showing such images, accusing her of exploiting the same liberal, bourgeois sentimentalism that was currently being harnessed by the media to channel funds to NGOs that would only intensify the political disempowerment of the Haitian people. Furthermore, such images perpetuated the myth of Haitians as victims, unable to help themselves, dependent on the charity of others and unable to challenge the way images of them were being used by foreign media. At the time, and under the circumstances, these seemed like technical, theoretical points. But I fully agreed with them. It was clear from previous disasters and the patterns which followed, that despite millions of dollars that would be raised by the general public (often *via* celebrity-endorsed, televised charity campaigns exploiting our compassion for the suffering of others), ultimately the major aid organisations would be ineffective and most of the revenue raised would end up paying the salaries of foreign aid workers, the executives of NGOs, and the contracts for reconstruction and development would be given to foreign companies. The accusations levelled at Buck-Morss suggested that immediate emotional responses to images of the suffering of distant others were a self-indulgent, sanctimonious reflex that deflected attention away from the real economic and political causes of structural violence. I wanted to say something in her defence. But I was already weighed down by a sense of powerlessness that the presence of the US military now made almost absolute.

> This powerlessness defines an apex of possibility, or at least, awareness of the impossibility opens consciousness to all that is possible for it to think. In this gathering place, where violence is rife, at the boundary of that which escapes cohesion, he who reflects within cohesion realises that there is no longer any room for him.[10]
>
> *Theory of Religion*[11]
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> 'We have become the subjects of our own history.' Aristide said in 1987, and 'We refuse from now on to be the objects of that history.'[12]

I will not rehearse a general introduction to Bataille's thought. I will simply underline the essential (usually obscured) interdependence of religious, economic, and philosophical thought and the central role of violence in this. I also will not labour a critique of charity. It is self-evident that charity has meanings common to all three discourses and it is widely acknowledged, at least on the left, that charity ultimately perpetuates the ills that it seeks to alleviate. The important point in the case of Haiti is that US military intervention there operates in concert with an ongoing Christian imperialist programme that has been waging a religious war against Vodou, the primary religion of Haiti, since at least 1860.13

Theory of Religion is divided into two parts. Part one—'The Basic Data'—begins with the primal condition of 'animal intimacy' (a realm of continuity, immediacy, or immanence from which the human world is fundamentally separated), through the positing of a world of subjects and objects, to the development of war as an externalisation of communal, sacred violence to the outside, the reduction of humans to slaves and the institution of human sacrifice. Part Two—'Religion Within

the Limits of Reason'—traces the development of religious thought from the establishment of an imperial, militaristic order (which externalises violence to the outside) to the growth of industry.

The break between the two sections is pivotal because it marks a transition between an understanding of religion in which sumptuary, non-rational, and orgiastic violence is intimately associated with the experience of the sacred, to one in which the expenditure of wealth (or force) is strictly reduced to the acquisition of greater force. Violent sacrifice has a fundamental role in the previous world, affording temporary access to the lost realm of animal intimacy. In the latter the right to violence is exercised by a sovereign, imperial order that associates non-productive, violent sacrifice with evil.

Part One—The Basic Data

The human world begins with the positing of objects and the use of tools, which creates a 'transcendent' realm of objects in opposition to the undifferentiated continuity of immanence. Through sacrifice, the animal (or object), which had been reduced to a thing (or a tool) serving man's utilitarian ends, is restored to the 'vague sphere of lost intimacy' (p. 50) from which it was withdrawn.

In the fallen world of the objectively real 'nature becomes man's property but ceases to be immanent to him'. (p. 41) The act of subordinating nature ties man to a subordinated nature and eventually man himself is reduced to a thing. 'The agricultural product and livestock are things, and the farmer or the stock raiser, during the time they are working are also things […]. The farmer is not a man; he is the plough of the one who eats the bread.' (p. 42)

The return to lost intimacy cannot occur without violence (or a 'breaking loose' from the real order of things) such as happens in festivals where wealth and force are squandered uselessly. 'The constant problem posed by the impossibility of being human without being a thing and of escaping the limits of things without returning to animal slumber receives the limited solution of the festival'. (p. 53) It is a time of 'spectacular letting loose', a 'crucible where distinctions melt into the intense heat of intimate life'. (p. 54) Human community is ritually re-created through festival.

War marks a fundamental shift in man's relation to the violence of the sacred. It represents the unleashing of communal violence to the *outside*. Whereas the violence of sacrifice and festival wreaks havoc *within* the community of individuals who participate in it, 'armed action destroys others or the wealth of others'. (p. 57) Although war has a meaning akin to festival—'in that the enemy is not treated as a thing'—it is not primarily engaged in as a return to lost intimacy. (p. 58) Instead war posits the individual beyond the individual-as-thing in the 'glorious' individuality of the warrior, who reduces his fellow men to servitude. 'He thus subordinates violence to the most complete reduction of mankind to the order of things'. (p. 59) Slavery is a consequence of the unfettered violence of the warrior whose sacred prestige is a 'false pretense of a world brought down to the weight of utility'. (p. 59) 'The warrior's nobility is like a prostitute's smile, the truth of which is self-interest.' (p. 59)

Bataille argues that human sacrifice is 'the most radical contestation of the principle of utility' and 'the highest degree of an unleashing of internal violence'. (p. 60) Human sacrifice, such as the Christian god's bloody sacrifice of his only son, marks a transition from religion experienced as an 'orgy of consumption' returning isolated beings to a lost intimacy with animal immanence, to 'an organized […] rational use of forces for the constant increase in power'. (p. 65)

Military Order and the Pacification of Sacrifice

In Haiti, as in most other heavily exploited parts of the world, international aid is meant to develop a space open to foreign penetration and manipulation, a place free from intrusive government regulations, a place

> where people are prepared to work for starvation wages, a place where private property and profits receive well-armed protection but where domestic markets and public services do not. As several well-documented studies show, the development of such a place has been the explicit goal of the foreign donors (the US, the EU, the IMF and other unaccountable international financial institutions) who have usurped much of Haiti's sovereignty over the last thirty-five years.[13]

The advent of the military order is fundamentally tied to imperialism. Having organised a rational use of force, it makes conquest 'a methodical operation, for the growth of an empire'. (p.66) The empire 'is not a thing in the sense in which things fit into the order that belongs to them; it is itself *the order of things* and it is *a universal thing*' (emphasis added). (pp.66–7) 'The military order subordinates itself to ends that it [the empire] affirms: it is the administration of reason.' (p.66) 'Every presence around it is ordered relative to it in a project of conquest.' (p.66)

The military order, 'moving towards universal empire from the start', brings about 'a profound alteration in the representation of the world': a universal moral law designed to maintain the stability of the order of things. (p.69) Whereas originally the divine (pure) and malefic (impure) tendencies of the sacred were opposed to each other and distinct from the profane, now the former is associated with the imperial order of things (Universal Reason, the Good) while the latter becomes associated with a dangerous, chaotic, and irrational immanence (Evil, matter, the animal).

> The good is an exclusion of violence and there can be no breaking of the order of separate beings, no intimacy, without violence; the god of goodness is limited by right to the violence by which he excludes violence. (p. 80)

> The principle of military order is the methodical diversion of violence to the outside. If violence rages within, it opposes that violence to the extent it can. (p.65)

One of the principal arguments for the presence of the US military in post-earthquake Haiti was to prevent 'outbreaks of violence'. The expenditure of force was undertaken to ensure that aid would not be 'wasted' or 'spent irrationally' on a 'volatile' and 'hostile' population. Some mainstream media channels promoted the idea that Haiti was 'on the brink of anarchy', 'spiralling out of control', or 'descending into barbarism'. From a Bataillian perspective there are a number of things are at work here: the military expenditure of force to secure the disaster zone, and export the threat of violence to the outside (i.e. to Haitians); the charitable donations of money and supplies from *outside*, intended to alleviate the suffering of those same Haitians; and the threat of destructive violence issuing from the Haitian people who have been represented as being reduced to a state of animalistic barbarism.

The military expenditure of force conceals its religious character under the cloak of a utilitarian rationality and imperialist reason. In the name of 'disaster security' it holds the victimised population hostage to Christian charity, while suppressing the political agency of the Haitian people. The revenue raised by international charity organistions is systematically channelled away from the Haitian people and their government towards international aid organisations, further undermining their national sovereignty and self-determination. In this sense, militaristic humanitarianism, of the kind exercised in post-earthquake Haiti, can be understood as a secularised form of Christian-industrial, neo-imperialist violence.

> The basic paradox of this 'theory of religion', which posits the individual as a 'thing', and a negation of intimacy, brings a powerlessness to light, no doubt, but the cry of this powerlessness is a prelude to the deepest silence. (p.13)

1. Georges Bataille [1989], *Theory of Religion*, tr. by Robert Hurley, New York: Zone Books, 2001, p. 68.
2. Maurice Blanchot [1986], *The Writing of the Disaster*, tr. by Ann Smock, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 1995, p. 3.
3. Bataille, *Theory of Religion*, p. 12.
4. Peter Hallward, 'Securing Disaster in Haiti', Monthly Review, MR Zine, 24 January 2010. <http://mrzine.monthlyreview.org/2010/hallward240110.html>, accessed 30 April 2012.
5. Naomi Klein, *The Shock Doctrine*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2008.
6. Hallward, 'Securing Disaster in Haiti'.
7. Hallward, 'Securing Disaster in Haiti'.
8. A recent article by Bill Quigly and Amber Ramanauskas accounts for where the money raised for disaster relief and reconstruction 'did and did not go'. Figures show that less than one per cent of the $3.6 billion raised by charity donors actually went to the Haitian government, while most returned to the donor nations in the form of payment for civil and military disaster response; payment to UN agencies and NGOs involved in UN projects; to private contractors and independent NGOs; and to the international Red Cross. The largest single recipient of earthquake money was the US government itself. Bill Quigly and Amber Ramanauskas, 'Where the Relief Money Did and Did Not Go Haiti After the Quake', *Counterpunch* (3 January 2012), <http://www.counterpunch.org/2012/01/03/haiti-after-the-quake>, accessed 30 April 2012.
9. Buck-Morss' talk was based on the book published a year earlier that explored the role of the Haitian revolution in the philosophy of Hegel (Susan Buck-Morss, *Hegel, Haiti and Universal History*, Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2009). The book argues that Hegel had written the master and slave dialectic sections of *The Phenomenology of Spirit* with Haiti in mind, but had chosen not to acknowledge it.
10. Bataille, *Theory of Religion*, p. 10.
11. *Theory of Religion* is a philosophical fable about the development of forms of religious life. It is deeply indebted to the philosophy of Hegel (to which Bataille was introducedby Alexander Kojève in the 1930s)—in particular the master-slave dialectic—and Durkheimian anthropology. A central issue throughout all Bataille's writing is the role of sacrifice as a middle term between religious, philosophical and economic being. Further references are given after quotations in the text.
12. Peter Hallward, *Damming the Flood—Haiti, Aristide and the Politics of Containment*, London: Verso, 2007, p. xxxv.
13. For an overview of the Christian demonisation of Vodou as a pretext for suppressing democracy movements in Haiti, see Richard Sanders 'Demonizing Democracy: Christianity vs. Vodoun, and the Politics of Religion in Haiti', <http://coat.ncf.ca/our_magazine/links/63/63_3.htm>, accessed 30 April 2012.

Catastrophe

Geraint Evans

For one hundred and eighty days in the early 1970s a three-man crew lived in a closed ecosystem in Krasnoyarsk, Siberia, cultivating wheat and vegetables and basking in artificial light generated by xenon lamps. This was the culmination of experiments carried out by the Soviets since the 1960s as part of the Bios-3 project.

Twenty years later, two groups of American volunteers lived for up to two years in the closed environment of Biosphere 2, an ambitious Arizona-based successor to Bios-3. Consisting of a series of human-made biomes (including mangrove wetlands, rainforest and ocean) Biosphere 2 was designed to replicate the functions of Biosphere 1: the Earth. Although Bios-3's data was closely controlled and Krasnoyarsk remained off-limits to Westerners, Biosphere 2's co-founder John Allen met with core members of the Soviet project in 1986 to share the results of their research to date.

The Biosphere 2 missions were dogged by wildly fluctuating levels of CO2, decreasing levels of oxygen, cockroach predation, accusations of cultish activity and ultimately, the entire project was derailed by an act of internal sabotage.

These bold attempts to contrive a self-sustaining ecosystem were seen as crucial to the success of lengthy space missions or establishing a base on the moon or Mars. In the face of inevitable climate change these closed systems might also provide a means of escape from a planet caught in the grips of catastrophe.

At the same moment as Bios-3's 1972 mission, Douglas Trumbull's cult science fiction film *Silent Running* was released. The film's narrative describes an eight-year closed ecosystem project which aimed to preserve Earth's last remaining plant life in vast geodesic domes attached to a fleet of American Airline space freighters. The mission is dogged by a largely indifferent crew and fluctuating light levels. Ultimately, the entire project is derailed by an American government order to put the freighters back to a more profitable commercial use while destroying the domes and the plant life within. The film's final scene depicts a single salvaged dome drifting into deep space, its plants tended by a lone gardener drone.