

Politics and Culture

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Putting Them To Work--Toby Miller and Rune Ottosen

PUTTING THEM TO WORK

by Toby Miller and Rune Ottosen

News World International is the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation's cable news channel in the United States, a cosmopolitan blend of Deutsche Welle, NHK, ITV, and CBC's own resources. Its earnestness is rather distorted by a diet of commercials advertising augmented genitals and diminished waist-lines, but there we are. On January 16 2005, NWI covered white tourists returning to Asian resorts following the tsunami. One recent arrival offered the following to the microphone: 'If we're going to help these people, we're going to have to put them to work.'

Her remark reminds one of the quid pro quo moralism and exchange economy that are so much a part of US culture. In the lonely hour of the last instance, it's all about "us" putting "them" to work-whether via the VonDutch tsunami t-shirts that quickly went on sale along Melrose Avenue in Los Angeles, or nationwide tsunami happy hours-amounting to 'the latest in impulse buys' (Roy, 2005). That said, we want to jump off from the tourist-in-the-street's remark, to examine two aspects of the 2004-05 tsunami crisis and its incarnation in the global North: "putting them to work" in the light of political economy and media images.

When Jan Egeland, the United Nations Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian affairs, described Western nations as 'stingy' immediately after the tsunami, noting the failure of wealthy powers to provide a fair proportion of their income to the global South, this drew immediate and predictable opprobrium from the right in the US, once isolationist, now imperialist. George Bush Minor called the remark 'misguided and misinformed,' a reflection on a 'very generous, kindhearted nation' (quoted in "Stingy," 2004). The reality is this:

The US gives less aid for development per capita than any

other wealthy country. At 0.15% of Gross Domestic Product (the US population believes the amount is twenty times the real figure), it falls far behind the guarantees made by the rich nations at the beginning of the century, despite having 25% of the world's wealth, and spending twice the amount on pet food each year that is required to feed the world's human population. And there are many caveats on even this level of giving. A vast amount of US aid goes to one country (Israel), and food aid is frequently provided in the form of goods bought from US commodity producers when world prices are down (Sardar and Davies 2002: 79-80, 82; Krugman 2003: 380; Diven, 2001). Then there is efficacy: disaster aid is notorious for making headlines rather than landings. Since Bam in Iran was destroyed by an earthquake in 2003, just US\$17.5 million of US\$1.1 billion promised in external assistance has arrived. Nicaragua and Honduras have waited seven years for most of the Hurricane Mitch relief, and Mozambique's 2000 flood aid has seen promises renege on again and again ("More Generous," 2005)

For the global South, First-World largesse depends on Western media organizations defining a disaster as newsworthy and supposedly beyond human agency—the 'sudden, elemental' kind occasioned by weather and geology. Of course, it is ludicrous to understand these events as apolitical. For example, the very notion of there being a sovereign-state of the Republic of the Maldives relies on its not being consumed by the sea, while Bangladesh necessarily experiences floods and tidal waves because of where its people must live (Benthall 1995: 11-13). There is much discussion in the aid community of 'compassion fatigue' in the West, which supposedly is 'the unacknowledged cause of much of the failure of international reporting today' because of 'the public's short attention span, the media's peripatetic journalism, the public's boredom with international news, the media's preoccupation with crisis coverage.' Countering this fatigue leads to a focus on simple formulae, images of childlike innocence disrupted and imperiled, a ratcheting up of horror in order to qualify for attention (Moeller 1999: 2).

The same week as the tourist-on-the-street spoke to NWI, the neoliberal but pro-democratic Economist magazine noted that foreign aid for disasters 'is generally thought to be different: everyone is for it' ("More Generous," 2005).

'Everyone' also seems to acknowledge that natural disasters 'are not socially neutral in their impact' (Bidwai, 2005). They seem to differ from the supposed corruption and dependency endemic to conventional development aid. But the magazine went on to blur the distinction, quoting from the outgoing US Secretary of State, Colin Powell, on US assistance to sufferers of the tsunami. Powell avowed that the disaster would 'give the Muslim world . an opportunity to see American generosity, American values in action' (quoted in "More Generous," 2005). This of course picked up on Powell's instrumentalist use of Non-Governmental Organizations (the beloved third sector of romantic anti-statist intellectuals). He tellingly refers to NGOs as 'a force multiplier for us . an important part of our combat team' (quoted in Mann 2003: 119).

On that score, the USS Abraham Lincoln was dispatched, along with other US military personnel and matériel, to assist after the tsunami. The Lincoln had been, of course, the site (safely off San Diego) where Bush Minor had announced 'Mission Accomplished,' just as the 2003 rebellion in Iraq was beginning. It arrived in Indonesia while the citizenry of Fallujah, their city devastated by occupation forces after the attacks starting on November 8 2004, were being allowed back-subject to massive electronic and DNA surveillance. The 800 'unworthy' victims (according to the Iraqi NGO Body Count) in Fallujah got little attention in the Western media. The Guardian had a reporter in the city before some of the 300,000 citizens were allowed back. He saw dogs eating dead bodies and asked: 'The City was completely devastated-but where were the bodies of all the fighters the Americans said they killed?' (Guardian January 11 2005). Given the toll of more than 100,000 civilian casualties since the start of the occupation in March 2003 (Roberts et al., 2004; Media Lens, 2005) the symbolic freighting for the US military of an alternative task and image for the Lincoln was clear. The dreadnought that brought doom was now a savior (T Jones, 2005). What matter that the aid promised to tsunami sufferers by the US equaled the price of a week's occupation of Iraq, or that Minor's inauguration cost the same as the amount needed to rebuild Sri Lanka's coastline (Pilger, 2005)? The numbers of dead the Lincoln had enabled in the killing fields of Iraq-contested, concealed-were overdetermined by the number of dead it accompanied in Asia-agreed, overt-as imperial power

showed its positive side. It presented a magical resolution to the US 'dichotomy of conscience' (Marshall, 2005)-what Dahr Jamail refers to more critically as 'The Tsunami of Iraq' in his chilling description of a visit to a morgue that stores people who have fallen to US fire (2005). At the same time, US interests in the region were obvious, and both the Indonesian government and others were suspicious of an ongoing Gringo presence. DC was 'crying with one eye' (Polo, 2005).

This encourages us to address recent regional history. Much of the region affected by this tsunami has been devastated by a series of shocks since 1997. That year saw a massive economic crisis, followed by the impact of burning forests in Indonesia. The Bali bombings in 2002 and the outbreak of SARS in 2003 completed a series of disasters for tourism, until December 26 2004 reinforced what is being called 'constant shock syndrome' ("Back to the Beach" 2005: 55). All these traumas and reactions involve purposive and accidental human action and inaction, some to a greater extent than others. This suggests equal and semi-autonomous significance to natural phenomena, social forces, and textualization. Just as objects of scientific knowledge come to us in hybrid forms that are coevally affected by social power and textual meaning, so the latter two domains are themselves affected by the natural world (Latour 1993: 5-6).

Clearly, the insistence on structural adjustment by the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, the World Trade Organization, and the sovereign-states that dominate them has been crucial in creating the conditions of existence for all these tragedies. By preaching the liturgy of comparative advantage, the neoliberal clerisy has encouraged a turn away in many parts of the world from subsistence agriculture and towards tradable goods, beyond manufacturing capacity and in the direction of service exchange. In much of South-East Asia, structural adjustment has animated a movement of people to littoral regions in search of work. Since the 1980s, fish-farming corporations have created a new aquaculture that displaced the natural environment of mangroves and coral reefs protecting people and land-as effectively ordered up for them by the World Bank (Sharma, 2005; Shiva, 2005). The push for the Third World to constitute itself as a diverting heritage site and decadent playground for the West has

also seen Thailand, Indonesia, and Malaysia undertake massive construction projects of resorts located at the point where high tides lap, both attracting more and more workers and decimating more and more natural protection, such as mangroves (areas that had not been directed to remove natural barriers suffered dramatically fewer casualties in the tsunami) (Bidwai, 2005; Sharma, 2005; Shiva, 2005).

The economic impact of these changes is undoubted. The World Travel & Tourism Council estimates that tourism provides 8.1% of employment across South-East Asia via 19 million jobs, and 7.4% of the region's Gross Domestic Product (US\$103.8 billion) (2004). But this industrial growth did not extend to the much-touted "revolution" in communication (another fantasy beloved of cybertarians and other cultural determinists, like the sainthood bestowed on NGOs). The idea that an early-warning system in the region would have saved lives is laughable. Australia issued an alert 30 minutes after the earthquake, but tens of millions of people in the region lacked the electricity to receive it-and will continue to do so if global forms of power remain wedded to increasingly scarce fossil fuels (Rifkin, 2005).

Tourism development did, however, see the emergence of another key cultural sector: sex. Empower, an organization of Thai sex workers, estimates that 2,000 of the folks it represents died in the tsunami. Many were undocumented migrants. Like the work they did, their very selves were illegal. Their contribution to the economy was rarely quantified or acknowledged. They paid taxes, but were not eligible for public assistance or labor protection. Not surprisingly, survivors wish to return to work immediately to support themselves and their dependants (Empower, 2005). Given the centrality of services to the livelihood of so many, it would be classic cultural-studies churlishness to denounce tourism tout court and fail to propose alternatives. Clearly, we need to support environmentally secure reconstruction, just as regulation is needed to ensure safe sex work. The dangers introduced by structural adjustment must be faced head on, in both the legal and illegal sectors, for their pleasures and risks. Putting them to work should not be done as it was in the past. But it probably will be: econocrats at the Asian Development Bank are earnestly avowing that good can come from the

disaster. The economic impact will be 'somewhat positive' because despite 'a deep sentiment of sadness' that is created by such disasters, 'a quick recovery process follows in a V-shape' with 'a large multiplier effect' (2005). So that's alright then.

And back in the First World? Much was made in the media of how William and Harold Windsor (AKA Princes William and Harry) wept when they saw tsunami damage on television ('We were really upset about it' said the older one). News stories proliferated about their personal involvement in compiling hygiene packs as part of Red Cross relief efforts ("Princes Help," 2005). But within a few moments, Prince Harry was himself the subject of images, photographed at a fancy-dress party in the uniform of the Afrika Korps, sporting an armband with a Swastika. Flirting with Nazism has of course been a long tradition within his family, but it was striking that his political statement was derided so roundly in contrast with his brother's costume-a leopard/lion hybrid. This was said to be a fine way of meeting the party's theme: 'native and colonial' (S Jones, 2005). Some might have found the sight of wealthy aristocrats revisiting their heritage of colonial enslavement to be as tasteless as National Socialism, especially when coupled with the Caliban-like association of the colonized with the animal world. But no, only Harry was criticized. This form of cultural memory, in which crimes against European humanity are deemed infinitely worse than crimes against colonized peoples elsewhere, matches precisely the news media's focus on tourists' survival, from individuating their names and stories, to linking with their home broadcasters, governments, and churches.

Putting Harry and William to work must mean more than seeing them pack up boxes of tissues and tampons. It must remind them not only of their family's ties to fascism, but also to an equally dehumanizing imperialism, colonialism, and neoliberalism. That may be just as important a way of fighting compassion fatigue as putting Asian tourism employees back to work, restructuring a tourism industry that is climatically and sexually safe.

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