

George Clooney's Haiti – and Beyond

January 23, 2010

George Clooney (currently in “Up in the Air”) organized on short notice a technically and musically fine two hour fund-raising telethon, “Hope for Haiti,” which was broadcast on January 22 on most networks, many cable channels, on the Web, and both in and beyond the US. Here are two samplers of the music: one and two.

Performers included Bruce Springsteen, Stevie Wonder, Bono, Rihanna, Madonna, Beyonce, Jennifer Hudson, Mary J. Blige, Sting, Shakira, Alicia Keyes, Dave Matthews, Justin Timberlake, Sheryl Crow, Coldplay, The Edge, Wyclef Jean, and many others. Strangely, most were not named, and your recognition of who was performing depended on how deeply embedded you are in current popular music, e.g. whether you can tell Madonna from Lady Gaga (who wasn't there.)

This was a worthy and well-intentioned endeavor, and we ought to be grateful to Clooney and the performers, who raised money for such good organizations as Partners in Health, and Doctors Without Borders (Medecins sans Frontieres). As for the content, people with Movement experience will be particularly struck by Bruce Springsteen's adaptation to the Haitian context of “We Shall Overcome,” with guitar, accordion, and trumpet. Jennifer Hudson sang a gospelized version of the Beatles' “Let it Be”; and Wyclef Jean Gave an exhilarating performance, taking off from “Rivers of Babylon” (I'll discuss this below).

But, in most of the show, politics were verboten, as was anything about the history of the place. This left the audience to think that a terrible natural disaster had befallen Haiti, but ignorant of: the country's origins in a successful slave rebellion (with US support for French efforts to crush it); more than a century of French draining the economy for the money value of the slaves they had lost; nineteen years of occupation by the US Marines; US complicity with the Duvaliers; after earlier support, exiling of Jean-Bertrand Aristide on a US plane; the banning of the left party, Lavalas; the crimes committed against the Haitian economy by neoliberal economics via such institutions as the IMF (which, amidst the earthquake announced a wage freeze for public employees in Haiti.). This all added up to an unnatural disaster: enormous poverty, flight from the countryside to the city as the result of the destruction of Haitian agriculture by US dumping (rice) and the promise of low-wage manufacturing jobs (which didn't materialize); once crowded in the city, they put anything over their heads that they could, and of course these poor structures easily collapsed. Cutting down trees to make charcoal was one of the few ways of getting money, and that produced deforestation which produced floods. It denies history to see the US as free of responsibility for these things.

Historians are coming to realize that very few things are simply “natural disasters.” Famines, for instance, can be made or exacerbated by governments. (Consider the English role in the 19th century Irish famine.) The earthquake would have been terrible anyplace, but because of Haiti's impoverishment by the West, its impact on life went far beyond 7.0 on the Richter Scale. The horrors visited upon Haiti are no more an “act of god” than were the horrors of Katrina.

Instead of the quite visible underside of the US role in Haiti , Clooney's telethon gave us Anderson Cooper patting on the heads of little black children who had been pulled from the rubble, expressing genuine affection for them but offering a classic tableau of white paternalism: as in Hollywood, so on TV, the experience of the Other has to be passed on to us by Somebody Like Us (as in “Schindler's List,” or “Amistad” as described in my “Black Agency in the Amistad Uprising: Or, You've Taken our Cinque and Gone.”). But most notable was the relative absence of Haiti itself from the music and sets (missing the color and wonder of Haitian art), conveying the accurate impression that this was

something done for rather than by Haitians. There were a few Haitian performers including Jean and Emeline Michel (who sang Jimmy Cliff's "Many Rivers to Cross"). I was struck by the sight of Haitian singers singing (well) songs of Jamaicans Jimmy Cliff and Boney M., which reminded me of Ronald Reagan's discovery of Africa: "You know, they're all different countries down there."

The show came to a powerful and moving conclusion with Wyclef Jean singing the mournful "Rivers of Babylon." Midway, he switches to Creole. Then, in a moment reminiscent of "Freunde, nicht dieser tone," he brings the music to a stop and cries out, "enough! Hold up! Let's show them how we do it where we come from," followed by tooting horns, drums and Jean bobbing, wrapped in the Haitian colors. A mournful song becomes a song of resistance to the fate seemingly laid down on Haiti.

The US continues to view Haiti through a racist lens. This was shockingly clear in David Brooks's January 14 *New York Times* column, "The Underlying Tragedy." "It is time," Brooks writes, "to put the thorny issue of culture at the center of efforts to tackle global poverty." What follows is pure culture-of-poverty blame-the-victim stuff, reminiscent of, among others, Moynihan on the "pathology" of the Black Family: "Haiti ... suffers from a complex web of progress-resistant cultural influences," including Voodoo and "high levels of social mistrust." "Responsibility," he froths, "is often not internalized." Brooks has all but told us that they are a nation of welfare queens.

A different manifestation of this kind of thing appears in the portrayal of Haitians as constituting an unruly mob amidst "anarchy" and "chaos." This has been reflected in a shameful US policy of giving preference to the military over relief (food and medicine) on the assumption that the military is needed to keep order. The US simply occupied the Port-au-Prince airport, set up their own air traffic control to replace the damaged original and proceeded to one of the great atrocities of this period: with priority given to US military flights, they turned away eight planes with field hospitals etc. provided by Medecins sans Frontieres. (They also yielded to high-level string pulling for the Pennsylvania governor's plane, and, incredibly, gave priority to two planeloads of Scientology healers paid for by John Travolta). The claim that an armed military is needed before food and medicine takes us back to the era of Gustave LeBon and the even more ancient idea of ordinary people (especially non-whites) as animals, mindless and selfish, predisposed to riot. This may yet happen, but only because authority has demonstrated again and again how unworthy it is of popular trust. Meantime, belying the stereotype, most Haitians patiently queue.

This takes us a long way beyond George Clooney. But both in popular culture and in foreign policy this country desperately needs to re-examine the lenses through which it views the non-white world.