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Berkeley Undergraduate Journal

Title

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Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/2dc48859>

Journal

Berkeley Undergraduate Journal, 25(3)

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Publication Date

2012

DOI

10.5070/B3253015960

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Peer reviewed|Undergraduate

BEYOND THE BINARY

New Roles and Implications of NGOs in Haiti

By Julia Uyttewaal



The Roi Christophe Hotel in Cap-Haitien, Haiti, serves as a comfortable rendezvous for both foreigners and well-traveled Haitians. It was, therefore, fitting that I found myself leisurely lounging there one Saturday afternoon after asking Joshua, a Haitian volunteer for a small grassroots community health organization, to speak with me about his work. As we discussed the privileged and sometimes rather removed circuit in which foreigners travel, Joshua shared his opinions on why foreigners often fail in their attempts to “help” Haiti: “They’ve come with brilliant ideas, and they’re going to transform the world! They’ve come with a magic wand that will change everything. And from there they learn how to fall flat on their faces. That’s what they don’t understand. It’s that we are a people, we are a nation, we have a culture, we have a democracy. You can’t import development. It’s impossible.”

My research project examines the coordination and collaboration practices of health NGOs (non-governmental organizations) at the local level in the North Department of Haiti. Through the lens of the Cap-

Haitian Health Network, an organization with which I interned over the summer, I will question whether or not local practices of individual NGO workers and local Haitian authorities challenge academic critiques that pit NGOs against the Haitian state.¹

In this paper, I specifically discuss how individuals, both Haitian and foreign, attempt to resist national and international hegemonic structures while still operating within these confines to present an acceptable “face” to the outside. To illustrate this point, I will draw on three specific instances and conversations I had while in Haiti that manifest acts of individual resistance. First, I will discuss how the Haitian state’s extreme centralization affects government workers and NGO partners at the local and regional level in Cap-Haitian. Extreme centralization often drives individuals at the local level to find ways to work in spite of the centralized and deeply political structure. Second, I will illustrate the philosophy of one particular health NGO that negotiates both foreign and local ideologies and practices in an attempt to create a more accountable partnership with the local Haitian authorities. Third, I will explore how my participant observation became wrapped up in dominant power structures and relations. This was especially salient when the role of the “face” of the Cap-Haitian Health Network was conferred upon me at a large regional meeting only six days after my arrival in Haiti.

My research methods include participant observation in Haiti during the summer of 2012 with the Cap-Haitian Health Network. This organization seeks to build collaboration and communication amongst the many and often fragmented health NGOs and facilities that operate in the greater North region of Haiti. Through my internship with this organization, I was able to meet local government authorities in the Ministry of Public Health (MSPP) and the Ministry of Planning (MPCE), as well as NGO workers. I conducted in-depth interviews with 18 individuals from these groups regarding their experiences with and opinions about humanitarian and development work in Haiti.

As a brief background, I entered my research with the intent of examining and questioning mainstream popular and academic critiques that condemn both NGOs and the Haitian state as ineffective and corrupt. Haiti is often dubbed “The Republic of NGOs,” with anywhere from 3,000

1 E.g. Peter Hallward. *Damming the Flood: Haiti, Aristide, and the Politics of Containment*. (New York: Verso, 2007).

to 18,000 organizations estimated to be in operation.² Thus, a black-and-white picture often emerges which casts NGOs and the Haitian state as enemies incapable of working together to create any kind of change.³ My intent in this research is not to support or refute this painting; rather, I examine local practices in order to question the reductionist framework such a painting embodies. In doing so, I hope to open a dialogue as to *why* this essentialist understanding becomes dominant, thus creating space for an exploration of alternatives.

To frame my research findings, I will be referring to Gramsci's concepts of hegemony and common sense. For Gramsci, hegemony is not a static phenomenon in which one group exercises total control and domination over another, but it rather refers to a complex process through which dominant classes create hegemony using both coercion and consent. This theoretical approach leaves space for "the masses" to shape the different forms that hegemony takes and also create alternative hegemonies which keep alive the possibilities for change. Gramsci also explains how hegemonic structures gain their legitimacy through the production of common sense. Common sense refers to that which is taken for granted in a particular social order – it is the ideas and realities that are believed to be "just the way things are". However, this seemingly universal concept is, in reality, produced by a small fraction of society seeking to maintain hegemony. The implication, therefore, is that challenges to a contemporary hegemony—or alternative hegemonies—are possible through the creation of new, popular "common sense."⁴

I will also be working with Foucault's theories on knowledge and power, focusing on how certain knowledges are privileged and, therefore, create power differentials among different social groups. These power differentials may lead some to internalize notions of their own inferiority in relation to hegemonic discourses. A hegemonic discourse refers to a specific way of knowing — a system of thought that is privileged in a certain social order. It is through hegemonic discourse that the ruling class of a society is able to create and maintain power. This does not mean, however, that there are no alternatives. Foucault also provides us with the concept

2 Madeline Kristoff and Liz Panarelli, "Haiti: A Republic of NGOs?" U.S. Institute of Peace Brief, Washington, DC (2010).

3 E.g. Laura Zanotti, "Cacophonies of Aid, Failed State Building and NGOs in Haiti: setting the stage for disaster, envisioning the future," *Third World Quarterly* 31:5 (2010): 755-771.

4 Antonio Gramsci and David Forgacs, *The Antonio Gramsci Reader: Selected Writings, 1916-1935* (New York: Schocken, 1988).195-215; 327-345.

of “subjugated knowledges,” which refers to those forms of knowing that are considered illegitimate because they come from social groups who do not hold power. These knowledges are thus characterized by dominant narratives as “naïve,” “low-ranking,” and “disqualified.” However, hegemonic discourses can be subtly challenged when underprivileged groups find ways to express or act out their own subjugated knowledges.⁵

My first point analyzes how the Haitian state’s extreme centralization affects local government authorities and NGO actors. Several people I interviewed joked about how “all the major decisions are made in Port-au-Prince, and so are the minor ones.” The power of regional leaders to implement lasting changes is seriously dampened by central level bureaucracy and power mongering. Thus, individual government workers at the local level are often left trying to dance around Port-au-Prince’s demands if they wish to make a positive impact in their regions. However, resistance to high centralization and ineffective bureaucracy was manifested in several ways during my stay in Cap-Haitian this summer.

In an attempt to know more about the activities of various health and sanitation organizations in the region, the local direction of the MSPP held “health cluster” meetings twice monthly. These meetings were not mandated by central level authorities but rather were the initiative of individuals in the local leadership to garner more information about the projects happening in their area. Local government workers do not have the authority to dictate to organizations what work should be done; the Haitian state lacks the personnel, capacity, and funds to control what foreigners do in their country. Local authorities, however, mediate this lack of power by reaching out to organizations willing to partner with them. In this way, local authorities can keep better tabs on regional activities and request resources for medical emergencies and long-term health projects.

The minutes from these locally initiated health cluster meetings are public information that is directly relevant and important to health NGOs operating in the area. Ideally, these minutes should be easily accessible on the governmental MSPP webpage because their dissemination would greatly improve communication and coordination between organizations in the region. Here again, however, state centralization impedes the ability of local authorities to improve their regional work; the authorities cannot officially disseminate this information because even the process of putting information on the government website is highly bureaucratic,

5 Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972-1977* (New York: Pantheon, 1980). 80-84.

political, and therefore time-consuming. Instead, local authorities dance around this structural issue by disseminating the information as widely as possible via an email listserv that includes local authorities, NGO directors, and health facility directors. The widely understood “common sense” of Haitian political structures is that they are broken and corrupt; however, this knowledge of “the way things are” does not necessarily deter individuals *within* the structure from creating their own “common sense” practices that attempt to accomplish collaboration and partnership despite perceived barriers.

Common knowledge that the state is questionably functional at an institutional level results in the fact that successful work is almost always negotiated amongst individuals. The centrality of individual relationships is not lost on local Haitians, but an understanding of *where* this comes from is equally important when trying to conceive of alternatives. There are always a multiplicity of reasons for any phenomenon, but the disconnect between different social groups occurs when one reason is privileged or given too much weight over another, thus influencing that group’s perception of reality. This is how hegemony operates; for instance, many foreigners’ notion that the corruption of the state lies at the center of institutional weakness masks the more complex forces that create Haitian civil society. The legitimacy granted to this hegemonic discourse ends up blinding outsiders to alternative ways to negotiate aid and development. As Joshua told me, the lack of understanding outsiders have of the importance of purely Haitian phenomena make it so outsiders cannot contribute to the creation of a Haitian democracy. When foreigners attempt to import models without understanding the specificity of Haitian history and memory that deeply inform social consciousness and therefore contemporary public structures, how can the two meet each other honestly at the negotiation table?

What I have just outlined is not to say, however, that it is impossible for foreigners and Haitians to work together to create lasting change. In fact, my second point calls on the example of one foreign-directed and Haitian-recognized NGO that has successfully done just that. I interviewed Michael, the foreign director of the NGO in question, whose mission is to support already existing Haitian public health structures. He explained to me his views regarding why foreign-imported models often aren’t successful in Haiti. To illustrate his point, he used the expression, “Give a man a fish, you feed him for a day; teach a man to fish, you feed him for a lifetime.” He described how oftentimes, NGOs come into Haiti and “give

fish” — pass out rice to the starving masses instead of working with rice farmers to strengthen the agricultural base. Other NGOs come and try to “teach Haitians to fish.” This is also problematic, as Michael pointed out to me that “the hubris about that expression is that we [the foreign NGOs] come in, we know how to fish; if we tell people to be like us then they’ll be fine.” In other words, foreign knowledge and experience is privileged — just as Joshua stated, outsiders believe they have the answers, a “magic wand.” This outsider knowledge is the hegemonic discourse, and as such, foreigners often believe that if certain practices work in the U.S., they will work in Haiti as well.

Michael then turned the “teach a man to fish” expression around and explained how his organization’s philosophy attempts to avoid this disconnect by incorporating Haitian knowledge and experience as much as possible when working on a project: “It’s really about, we’re coming somewhere where we don’t know how to fish here, and they are in a situation where they’re not fishing here so maybe together we can sit down and say ok, there’s things you know about this that we don’t know and don’t understand, and there’s things that we have some expertise in that we could contribute to this if you want. Together we could probably do better than either of us could do alone.” In other words, Michael’s organization represents a locus of resistance as it actively looks to incorporate the subjugated knowledge of Haitians working in the public health sector. In doing so, his organization’s practices create a new, specific “common sense” that challenges the contested hegemonic structures of both international aid and the seemingly incompetent public structures of the local Haitian state apparatus.

These differential power dynamics and privileged knowledges do not simply play out on the large organizational and state structure field but manifest themselves very clearly in personal interactions and day-to-day contact. My own participant observation became fundamentally wrapped up in these dynamics, and I found myself both an object and a subject within the structures. My final point revolves around my experience in having the role of the “face” of the Cap-Haitian Health Network conferred upon me at a regional meeting of organizations only 6 days after my arrival in Haiti. Ten minutes before the meeting, a Haitian employee of the Health Network informed me that I would be introducing and leading the meeting — that I would talk about the Health Network and our recent accomplishments and act also as translator for everyone in the room. I found this absurd, as I had barely arrived and he had been working with

the organization for several years, in addition to being fluent in Kreyol, French, and English. This act demonstrated how foreigners, as those privileged with access to hegemonic discourse, are granted legitimacy and respect regardless of their experience or competency.

Local Haitians themselves, however, reinforce the cycle of foreigners being viewed as more knowledgeable and, therefore, “natural” leaders of organizations in Haiti. This reproduction of hegemonic power structures was clearly demonstrated when a local Haitian NGO worker placed someone such as myself in the role of the “face” of an organization, regardless of my credentials or experience. This act of some Haitians being complicit in the reproduction of whiteness as the legitimate knowledge source can be viewed in multiple ways. On one hand, it can be a manifestation of internalized inferiority and coloniality — the belief that, as those in need of “help,” Haitians are less intelligent or less competent to engage in aid and development work and rebuild their own country. The social conditions in Haiti, the historical environment of colonization, and the degradation of blackness contribute to the idea that, as Frantz Fanon analyzes, “whenever [the postcolonial subject] comes into contact with someone else, the question of value, of merit, arises.”⁶ Because of the history of white colonization and the continued presence of white foreign powers, Haitians have only been able to come to know themselves as subjects in relation to the hegemony of whiteness, leading to the “delusion” that they are inherently inferior.⁷

On the other hand, this act can be viewed as one of resistance. With the “common sense” in Haiti that foreigners have access to resources, funds, and legitimacy, Haitians knowingly place foreigners in the spotlight in order to obtain what they need. In this way, Haitians are working within and using the hegemonic structures that oppress them while subtly challenging and manipulating them to their own advantage.

Returning to Gramsci, we can discern at least two forms of hegemony operating in Haiti that prevent Haitians from taking the reins and revolutionizing their political and economic realities: (1) the highly centralized and ineffective Haitian state run largely by a small group of self-interested elites, and (2) the omnipresence of foreign international

6 Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Charles Lamm Markmann (New York: Grove, 2008), 163.

7 Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 168.

organizations that are often blind to how imported development models do not fit a Haitian cultural consciousness. However, these dominant structures are anything but static. As I've outlined, the acts of resistance at the local and individual levels are many and varying, and all of these contribute to an ever-expanding space for possibility and change. Subjugated knowledges find ways to express or protect themselves. New iterations of "common sense" are forged by Haitians and foreigners alike who seek to bridge differences and address difficult realities together, from a place of mutual understanding. There is no spell, no "magic wand" that will make the difficulties associated with NGOs and a weak Haitian state disappear overnight. There is always a space, however, to negate or negotiate differential power relations in an effort to conceive of an alternative "common sense." As Fanon points out, "As soon as I *desire*, I am asking to be considered ... I demand that notice be taken of my negating activity ... insofar as I do battle for the creation of a human world — that is, of a world of reciprocal recognitions."⁸

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8 Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 170.