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The Personal Side of Disaster Capitalism

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The Personal Side of Disaster Capitalism

Abstract

Two weeks ago a tornado ripped through my small hometown in rural Michigan (population 3,500), unexpectedly providing fresh perspective on the phenomenon Naomi Klein has called “Disaster Capitalism.” While I was writing this commentary, work crews were out with chainsaws and chippers, cutting up the remains of fallen trees and clearing mountains of debris from roads and sidewalks.

Keywords

Human rights, Capitalism, Government policy

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The Personal Side of Disaster Capitalism

Two weeks ago a tornado ripped through my small hometown in rural Michigan (population 3,500), unexpectedly providing fresh perspective on the phenomenon Naomi Klein has called “Disaster Capitalism.” While I was writing this commentary, work crews were out with chainsaws and chippers, cutting up the remains of fallen trees and clearing mountains of debris from roads and sidewalks.

Klein draws attention to the spread of privatized disaster relief, using the two catastrophes of Iraq and New Orleans as her primary examples. Her essay exposes a reality that is only slowly sinking in: Functions once considered at the core of governance responsibilities are increasingly being performed by private companies. Within the U.S., the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) was established in 1978 to provide direct disaster relief, but as Klein notes, Hurricane Katrina obliged FEMA to hire a contractor not simply to manage contracts, but to award them. Blackwater’s recent incident in Iraq, which left 17 Iraqi civilians dead, has at last focused attention on the expanding role of private military corporations. Klein’s article is threaded with alarm about the growing tendency to outsource disaster response or depend on private initiatives—but is this much ado about nothing?

As I reflect on Klein’s examples and look out on the clean-up efforts in my own disaster-struck community, I think the answer must be, “It depends” (it turns out that virtually all of the workmen who trampled through my backyard last week are employed by private industry under contract to utility companies or my little community. My town lives off of agriculture and light industry, and as a practical matter, it is hard to imagine how our tax dollars would be able to cover necessary services if all the equipment and personnel had to be on hand rather than on contract). Over the past two decades the U.S. has systematically privatized many erstwhile public services at every level of government—federal, state and local. In the interest of efficiency, and because private industry presumably does it “better,” government has been downsized and jobs that range from janitorial services to prison management have been outsourced. Klein’s account of this privatization focuses on the far edge of the phenomenon, where private contractors police the streets of New Orleans and perform military functions in Iraq. She leads us to, but never quite asks, the critical question: How far do we want this trend to go? Privatization and outsourcing attenuate the accountability of elected governance bodies. Are there some functions for which we do not want—and cannot ethically accept—reduced accountability?

Disaster preparations and decisions about disaster response inevitably involve utilitarian logic: What is feasible in view of available resources? What kinds of threats should receive priority preparations (and response)? Overall, how can the greatest good be achieved with the least expenditure of public resources?

From that starting point, a human rights perspective would weight the considerations in favor of fundamental human rights, beginning with the right to life itself. Even in the midst of disasters, every society—in proportion to its resources—has a rights-based duty to assure that everyone has access to basic, life-protecting emergency response, and above all, to see that no one is systematically excluded.

In addition, a human rights approach has to ensure fullest accountability for public response where lives may hang in the balance, whether by slow rescue (an act of omission), or by use of lethal force (an act of commission). It is one thing to outsource construction and maintenance. It is quite another to hire private police officers, or security guards, who may not in any substantial way be regulated by local authorities or even accountable to law and local ordinances. As an environmental contractor sent to remediate the effects of an electrical transformer that spilled its contents into my yard commented last week, “it all depends on who sets the rules, and who you’re ultimately working for.”

Susan Waltz is Professor at the University of Michigan’s Ford School of Public Policy. She has published extensively on the politics of human rights in North Africa and has recently completed a series of essays on small state participation in the negotiations of human rights standards. From 1996-1998 Dr. Waltz served as International Chairperson of Amnesty International.