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# Promoting Human Rights to Resist Disaster Capitalism

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How might critique and transformative education play a role in resisting various manifestations of disaster capitalism? Can ideas from Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* and *Pedagogy of Hope*, and Henry Giroux's critical pedagogy inform our systematic conceptualization of alternatives to harmful emergency management strategies? How might a human rights-based approach to disaster facilitate dignity and wellbeing in various contexts? These and other related questions have emerged from dialogues with my students and emergency management professionals who have joined our classes as guest lecturers over the last decade or so. They have led me to ponder over the possibility of resisting hegemony through public pedagogy. Analyses of discursive strategies contributed to our dialogue by highlighting pathways for resisting disaster capitalism and for enhancing human rights-based approaches.

When we refer to disaster capitalism after Naomi Klein, we typically refer to activities involving regulatory changes in the economic realm as well as broadening of state policing powers in the service of capitalist interests under the guise of environmental crisis, threats to state security, public order, or private property. By envisioning civically engaged citizens, community mobilization, and innovation, it is possible that human rights advocacy can counter the limits of this neoliberal imagination. This assumes that the history of disaster response prior to the dominant neoliberal model can also reaffirm the potential for community-based and humanitarian orientation.

According to Walden Bello's analysis, there are two models of disaster response: one in which the United Nations and the Red Cross provided relief to victims, enhanced social cohesion, restored functioning social organization, and repaired physical infrastructure and a new one characterized by militarization, dominance of the World Bank and nongovernmental organizations. The new model is informed by strategic interests, bureaucratic goals, profiteering, and ideologically inclined humanitarianism. One can see the new

model in the response to the 2014 Ebola epidemic in West Africa as well as “post-conflict” recovery in Afghanistan and Iraq.

Taking Bello’s approach is a starting point for engaging my students in the need for sustained critique of emergency management and post-conflict reconstruction. Ultimately we have to grapple with disaster capitalism not only as promoting profiteering over humanitarianism but also as an impediment to community participation, accountability in governance, and its role in reinforcing the power of the state, private capital, and elites. Based on this goal, we explore ways of pushing back against these practices and of reframing public safety as an arena of citizen action and empowerment. This is especially important if disasters/emergencies, whether arising from natural hazards or human activity, are conceptualized as outcomes of sociohistorical processes and situations that elicit varied responses and involve struggle over competing visions, interests, and values.

As a complement to empirical cases showing the complex processes involved in disasters and emergencies, I have advocated for the practice of a human rights–based approach as a discursive framework for interrogating prevailing practices. This practice is also useful in exploring the potential of using civic engagement, community organizing, and community mobilization as conduits to participatory governance that can resist predatory practices associated with disaster capitalism. It recognizes the importance of subjectivity and co-construction of what is necessary for returning to a situation of normalcy, and respects local goals within a particular context.

For example, by framing the role of communities as key actors in preparedness, mitigation, response, and recovery has provided a pathway for reconfiguring the role of communities as critical to generating a sense of possibility and a sense of communal action in addressing emergencies and disasters since they are the ones immediately impacted. The broader story and its analysis cannot be covered in this essay due to space constraints. What follows is an attempt to summarize and share some of the remarkable lessons that I have learned from my students who have engaged with these issues as engaged citizens.

**A** human rights–based approach to emergency management fosters community engagement and participatory and accountable governance by providing avenues for personal and collective reasoned evaluation of ideas, evidence, and experience. It is therefore a channel for knowledge sharing and for giving voice to action for change. As well, it also opens up the possibility for participatory and deliberative governance and the co-creation and design of futures. It is worth noting that working for these changes requires that stakeholders remain cognizant of the contextual factors, especially the ways in which power relations shape the development of various forms of knowledge and emergence of discourses that can resist existing practices. It is

precisely because of this that the promotion of a human rights–based approach requires public pedagogy.

Public pedagogy using films to reveal and interrogate disaster capitalism and rights violations in the context of emergencies has the possibility of enhancing participatory and community-based knowledge mobilization. It can lead to higher interest in examining decision making in emergency situations in various contexts and the demand for resilience-enhancing practices. By debating viable alternatives and deliberating on empowerment-oriented alternatives to centralization of power by state officials, citizens can infuse informal conversations, and activities of everyday life with sustained critiques of disaster capitalism.

Films that systematically explore the prevailing practices can be used alongside first person accounts of the ways in which disaster capitalism has negated and violated the rights of individuals and disempowered communities from self-determination. Visual representations and stories such as those captured in Frontline’s *The Business of Disaster* on the reconstruction following Super Storm Sandy or the three Frontline documentaries (*The Storm*, *The Old Man and the Storm*, and *Law and Disorder*) that deal with Hurricane Katrina, its impact, and its aftermath in New Orleans have provided a pathway for engaging students in debates on human rights in the context of emergencies, as well as on the role of the state and government in protecting human rights during emergencies. *The Business of Disaster*, an investigative documentary produced by PBS Frontline and National Public Radio, examines who profited when disaster struck more than three years after Superstorm Sandy. It reveals that thousands had not returned home, that government agencies failed to help, and that companies made over 400 million dollars in profit. Through interviews and official records it provides a detailed and nuanced picture of the ways in which official policy allows flood insurance companies to profit without providing the expected coverage to those affected. It shows cases where flood insurance failed to address the harm resulting from a natural hazard.

**I**n questioning prevailing practices and exploring potential public education strategies we have found that viewing and discussing documentary and feature films opens space for engagement. For example, analyzing footage on the aftermath of the 2010 Haiti earthquake or the post-conflict reconstruction practices in Afghanistan (*A House for Haji Baba* and *This is What Winning Looks Like*) allows participants to deconstruct aspects of emergency management and post-conflict reconstruction that would otherwise be taken for granted and go unchallenged. Asking participants to point to practices depicted in such films that they would wish to see change offers opportunities for critical engagement that can galvanize participants into activism. This was the case when I used *Disaster Capitalism: Making a Killing out of Catastrophe* directed by Antony Loewenstein and Thor Neureiter. The

film's use of multiple sites—Afghanistan, the United Kingdom, Haiti, Papua New Guinea, the United States, Greece, and Australia—led most of my students to argue that profiteering amid suffering is a transnational issue that needs to be challenged in multiple ways. They seem to suggest in their critiques and proposals that the task is to figure out ways of balancing immediate and pragmatic action with the obligation to respect and protect human rights of vulnerable individuals, communities, and marginalized groups.

In a recent viewing, participants who viewed the film contended that integration of human rights must be an ongoing consideration and not an afterthought. While some maintained that concerns about public safety and private property must remain a key consideration, it became untenable to support disaster capitalism and practices that capitalize on crisis to introduce what citizens would oppose under normal circumstances. Those identifying instances such as terrorism and threats to state security and first responders as reasons to be careful about advancing human rights still acknowledged that emergency planning must strive to adhere to human rights guidelines. The film viewing and discussion illustrated how citizens can be made aware of how power profits from disaster and how resistance can contribute to change. This shows that individuals and groups can be inspired to engage in dialogue on the promotion and protection of human rights in emergencies in various spaces, organizations, situations, and practices.

I have seen this vividly demonstrated when groups work on small projects aimed at co-constructing resistance to disaster capitalism through designing alternative policies and practices of emergency management that promote justice, equity, human rights, and sustainability. Such projects, although “mock interventions,” reveal the capacity of citizens to grasp the interrelated dynamics that foster community participation and collaboration in managing emergencies, and to discuss their implications for policy and practice. Participants are keen to explore the ways in which values such as justice and human rights can be integrated into disaster awareness campaigns. They also grapple with how continuing education curricula can strengthen the resolve of emergency managers to work with communities in the search for sustainable solutions. Reflecting on these activities participants have tended to express surprise at the potential for facilitating working relationships among community stakeholders and experts in developing emergency management plans. They also routinely identify the potential role of communicative action in framing/reframing policy process and outcome assessment.

Knowledge about emergency management is essential to critiques of the dynamics of power and institutional arrangements at work in disaster capitalism. Deep awareness of the manifestations of disaster capitalism increases potential for engaging in structured analysis of the human rights dimensions of existing emergency management plans and practices. Those with such

knowledge can create opportunities for, and deploy human rights as, a discursive strategy through public pedagogy of international norms, guidelines and standards, news stories, films, and public policy. Their engagements in discourse, whether at local or national levels, can provide opportunities to work toward transforming the multifaceted workings of power. In so doing, they can promote human rights as a pathway to accountable governance in various sites, thereby offering counterhegemonic discourses for challenging prevailing policy and practice.

News reports by investigative journalists offer another avenue for gaining a perspective on disaster capitalism that can lead individuals to critique neoliberalism and its failure to recognize human needs. Stories of inequity such as those featuring homelessness of individuals who are fully employed have been especially effective in triggering my students' commitment to engage with information about disaster capitalism beyond the course requirements. For example, recent articles in *The Guardian* and *The New York Times* have reported on "disaster capitalism" by focusing on city workers and individuals working in the service industry in San Francisco and New York City, respectively, and have captured the lack of affordable housing and how profiteering has made it impossible for the two cities to comprehensively address the right to housing for their residents.

Such stories provide evidence of the exclusion of low income and poor individuals and families during rebuilding in New Orleans post-Katrina, and of the failure of flood insurance agencies to provide adequate compensation to homeowners in New York and New Jersey following Super Storm Sandy. Recognizing housing crises in major U.S. cities provides a starting point for engaging with emergencies and disasters arising from the failure of commodification of basic human needs within the context of the neoliberal political economy.

A human rights-based approach to emergency links theory, practice, and policy as well as the processes and relational dimensions of emergency management to illuminate pathways to mutually reinforcing understandings for those grappling with emergencies. It acknowledges that emergency management is constituted by an assemblage of players with wide-ranging social, political, and economic concerns. Haiti provides an illustrative example of the ways in which disaster capitalism, predicated on exploitation and profiteering, hampered rebuilding following the 2010 earthquake in a country where the discourse focused on charity rather than normative obligations. Countering disaster capitalism with a human rights-based approach shifts the focus from inevitability of profiteering to the importance of focusing on community well-being and dignity. By combining a consideration of Haiti with the United States (especially the experiences of individuals and families in New

Jersey and New York after Sandy) we can reveal the deleterious impact of power on human rights, dignity, and wellbeing.

Such information and resulting knowledge can enhance engagement in seeking ways of facilitating change in how societies respond to human needs and human suffering, rather than despairing and becoming indifferent. My students have shown that individuals and groups in universities can engage with questions concerning resilience, vulnerability, adaptation, mitigation, anticipation, risk and uncertainty, consumption, gender, migration, and displacement. They can link emergency management to human rights violation and structural violence and offer pathways for responding to disaster capitalism.

By working for community engagement over profiteering and militarization during emergencies, engaged citizens can mobilize against predatory and exploitative practices. They can instill their communities with sustainable practices at every stage of emergency management. This can be done by drawing on the United Nations Sendai Framework that calls for better understanding of all dimensions of exposure to disaster risk, vulnerability, and hazard characteristics, and stronger disaster risk governance as a reference point. The framework also calls for disaster risk management accountability and preparedness and recovery that fosters resilience and acknowledges that planners need to recognize the role of all stakeholders and avoid the creation of new risks through mobilizing risk-sensitive investment. It further urges action to ensure resilience of the health infrastructure, attention to cultural heritage and work-places, and to the strengthening of international cooperation and global partnership.

This framework can serve as a resource for connecting governance, ethics, and human rights to concerns around financing in preparedness and response by treating emergency management as a layered and multistakeholder process requiring ongoing dialogue. The UN Inter-Agency Standing Committee's Operational Guidelines on Human Rights and Natural Disasters adopted in 2006 and revised in 2011 provides a useful tool for advocates seeking to protect the human rights of individuals affected by natural disasters. The Workshop Report on Integrating Human Rights in Natural Disaster Management held in the Pacific Suva, Fiji Islands in May 2007 noted that women, children, disabled, elderly, and people living with or affected by HIV, are among the groups and individuals that may be in need of special consideration to ensure their rights are protected during disasters. The report identified several human rights awareness and implementation issues including: non-discrimination; equality; legal protection such as right to identity, security, and so on; access to health services, shelter and housing, clean water, and education; compensation and restitution; rights of internally displaced persons; and land and property issues. Individuals aware of these

guidelines are arguably more likely to ensure the protection of rights of the aforementioned groups.

Amita Singh and others have demonstrated the role of law in reducing disaster risk and improving emergency management. Litigation based on international human rights laws has provided the basis for demanding community engagement in reducing the risk and impact of disaster and improving resilience. Because local communities and local authorities tend to be the first responders in disaster situations, their contributions are critical to disaster risk reduction and response. Judicial decisions on human rights obligations in disaster management have highlighted the importance of rights-based approaches among key stakeholders (communities and political leaders) in vulnerable regions. These developments suggest that public pedagogy on the role of litigation and advocacy can potentially help resist “disaster capitalism,” and may also increase public participation in demanding accountability from authorities and private actors involved in disaster response.

Response to the 2014 Ebola epidemic in West Africa is another case that has been useful in generating dialogue on the need for community engagement. The case illuminated the importance of evidence-based and collaborative response to crises and emergencies as well as the crucial role of communities of practice in ensuring accountability. Human Rights Watch and Doctors without Borders were vocal in demanding that governments and security forces involved in the response work to ensure the right to health without violating human rights of those affected. The epidemic also revealed the importance of preparedness and community capacity development, especially the need for infrastructure and personnel in countries such as Liberia and Sierra Leone that were recovering from recent civil war. Through understanding the intersection between public health and human rights, and by examining the role of the state in infrastructure development, participants can begin to interrogate how profiteering might impede health and wellbeing by increasing risks and limiting the potential of communities to respond adequately.

**I**nformed citizens can foster the right to self-determination and community participation are sacrificed and corporate interests are prioritized over community voices in emergency management plans and responses. This is especially crucial when states suspend fundamental rights after declaring a state of emergency. Recent cases include Ethiopia, France, and Turkey that were under states of emergency in 2016 following political protests, terrorist attacks, and an attempted coup, respectively. It is crucial that communities develop comprehensive plans for reducing risks and vulnerability to all forms of threats and hazards, increase resilience of people experiencing emergencies and disasters, and develop mechanisms for ensuring that those in crisis get necessary assistance. Such plans call for both specialized emergency ser-



vices and mainstream resources—health and counseling services, housing, employment, education, and financial assistance—that enhance recovery, stability, and realization of personal goals. A human rights–based approach to emergency management is predicated on international human rights standards and on the promotion and protection of human rights. Advocates and communities seeking to contribute to the prevention of human rights violations in the context of disasters and emergencies have to mobilize public awareness as part of their effort to resist disaster capitalism.

Public debate on the role of human rights in emergencies can provide opportunities for planners to rethink how existing emergency management and post-disaster recovery plans can enhance wellbeing and dignity thereby challenging neoliberalism. By advocating for the integration of human rights into preparedness, mitigation, response, and recovery plans, communities promote accountable governance and reject practices that violate/compromise wellbeing and dignity.

In this way, promotion of human rights practice constitutes an arena for resisting disaster capitalism through emergency preparedness and planning that is focused on dignity and wellbeing using mock exercises, which increase the likelihood of their fulfillment in actual emergencies. As we approach the 70th anniversary of the Universal Declaration on Human Rights, and consider the implications of the UN’s guidelines on disaster that are in their second decade, human rights education and advocacy can serve as a pathway for resisting oppressive, exclusive, and exploitative practices associated with disaster capitalism. The cases and strategies offered above can be deployed in mobilizing community to resist predatory practices associated with disaster capitalism. Such efforts can draw on knowledge about resilience as well as insights from transformative and public pedagogy for inspiration.

Engaged citizenship arising from exposure to the importance of communities and human rights provides the basis for action aimed at policy changes aimed at moving human rights beyond contestation. In this way, participation in courses and workshops can serve as the first step toward assuring the protection and promotion of human rights and the recognition of the need for alternatives to disaster capitalism. It also serves as a step toward community empowerment and the promotion of ethics of care. It bolsters counterhegemonic discourses and can have an impact on various publics and stakeholders, leading to practices that enhance human rights and the attendant wellbeing and dignity.

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