

How We [and the French] Keep Ripping Off Haiti

by Stephen Elliott-Buckley - Monday, August 16, 2010

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It was so nice to see so many billions pledged to help Haiti after its earthquake where the planet kicked the country after it was down from centuries of racist, imperial and neoliberal exploitation.

But how much money pledged has shown up?

And worse, did you know that Haiti spent more than a century paying off France reparations money for their own freedom? Imagine what the country would have been like if it didn't pay that odious debt.

Let's explore all the odious exploitation of Haiti for the last 206 years, with special focus on the last seven months.

A group of international academics and authors has written to Nicolas Sarkozy calling on France to reimburse the crushing "independence debt" it imposed on Haiti nearly 200 years ago.

The open letter to the French president says the debt, now worth more than €17bn (£14bn), would cover the rebuilding of the country after a devastating earthquake that killed more than 250,000 people seven months ago.

via [France urged to repay Haiti billions paid for its independence | World news | The Guardian](#).

Do you know what [odious debt](#) it? Try this scenario on:

1. Some random banana republic is controlled by a kleptocratic dictator.
2. It arranges national loans from developed world banks [like the ones who own the bank machines we use] who know how screwed up the countries are.
3. Over a decade a billion is borrowed, but only 100 million goes into roads, schools and hospitals. The rest ends up in Swiss bank accounts of the relatives of the despot.
4. There's a glorious revolution and the people take [back] their country.
5. After getting new locks on the parliament and senate doors, they get a visit from the banks' emissaries in black SUVs. They are demanding repayment of the debts.
6. The people don't own the debt. The people have received virtually none of the money. The banks, really, have merely been robbed by the despot. Now the banks think the people of the fresh, new nation should pay it back.
7. That's just sick. It's odious, even. Thus odious debt.

Ok, now let's go to Haiti. Upon throwing off the shackles of slavery held by Napoleon, the French gunboats demanded 150 million francs, in 1804 currency, worth over \$21 billion today. They were gracious enough to reduce it to 90 million, which Haiti paid until 1946, worth 17 billion Euros today.

That's some kind of bold, despicable and cynical action from France that had just decades earlier helped the American colonies overthrow their British rulers. I suppose that wasn't pure altruism, though, for the French.

That's some kind of odious debt.

And the Haitians were slaves, after all.

Strangely, when Haiti's president was kidnapped in 2004, through the coordination of Canada, the US and France, Haiti had begun legal proceedings against France to recover that money. How lucky for France when the suit was dropped after the president was whisked off to Africa.

So today we read that not only has only 2% of the pledged money landed in country, Canada is one of the deadbeats having [delivered nothing as of a month ago](#). Disturbingly, Venezuela has also delivered nothing, though it forgave some debt. I had higher expectations of them than of a Canada, it run by a blue sweater vest of pain.

And now there is a movement for France to repay the freedom debt.

Count the ways we've been ripping off Haiti for 200 years.

Then count how much french wine and cheese and trips to Paris and Nice are consumed by people who happen to otherwise care about Haiti. I wonder if a boycott would be effective.

But more immediately, did you know that pledges for help after the earthquake have been mostly lies so far?

Did you know that Haiti had to pay cash for its own independence from slavery and that France has spent decades wallowing in the glory of that blood money while Haiti could have used it to avoid the destitution for which it has become the western hemisphere posterchild?

Because if you didn't know Haiti had to pay almost CAN\$23 billion in today's money for the right to remain former slaves, I'd bet most of your family and friends didn't know.

So let's figure out whether a French boycott would work on another day.

Today, your job is to tell everyone that we're still ripping off the Haitians. And that French is the baton twirler at the front of that parade.

That's odious. Let's spread some truth around.