Book Review: *Haiti after the Earthquake*

Alexandra Dinu, Webster University – Saint Louis

January 12, 2010 marked another dark day in the history of the Caribbean island of Haiti. One of the poorest and least developed countries in the world, it was struck by a massive earthquake – the worst in the past 200 years – which devastated its capital of Port-au-Prince. As a result, hundreds of thousands of people were displaced, injured and killed. In his book *Haiti after the Earthquake*, Dr. Paul Farmer vividly describes the earthquake’s impact on the country through his experiences working there as a medical doctor and as a United Nations Deputy Special Envoy for Haiti, when he sought to aid the country’s transition from disaster relief to reconstruction. Farmer has worked extensively in Haiti for the past thirty years and is also a professor at Harvard Medical School, chief of the Division of Global Health Equity at Brigham, and co-founder of Partners in Health.

The first eight chapters of his book intensely illustrate the suffering and resilience Farmer encountered in Haiti, as well as contains important information on the country’s record of poverty and political instability. Farmer’s main argument is that the disastrous effects were not caused by the earthquake alone, but also by an unfortunate blend of several other factors. One of the most important contributing factors is the long history of colonialism which affected Haiti both politically and economically. In 1825, France extorted Haiti for 150 million francs to compensate for the loss of the empire’s property (both land and slaves); Haiti managed to pay the debt, with interest, a century later. A military occupation by the United States followed in 1915 and lasted until 1934, with the purpose of
deterring European influence in the Western Hemisphere. Farmer claims that Haiti became anchored
more formally in the “American Hemisphere” through this nineteen year military occupation. When the
U.S. withdrew its troops, they left “a superficial calm and a social class that relied heavily on the army as
the arbiter of political transitions” (pg. 3). Haitians’ demands for democracy were also disrespected by a
merciless series of dictators and coup d’états supported by Western nations. Further problems included
political instability, the country’s refractory poverty (which worsened each year by such instability),
environmental exploitation (deforestation of hillsides), inadequately constructed houses, and lack of
adequate healthcare access. Farmer writes that this situation is one where “twenty-first-century people
die of nineteenth-century afflictions,” which contributes to the “acute-on-chronic disaster” that
occurred on January 12, 2012 (pg. 20). This environment set the stage not only for what happened
during immediately after the earthquake, but also contributed to the serious challenges facing
reconstruction.

Farmer’s Haiti after the Earthquake is forceful, in part, because of its writing style and
structure. The first eight chapters of the book seem to be Farmer’s personal diary in which he bears
witness. He chooses such writing style in order to account for that terrible time and to “echo and
amplify” the voices of those who lost their lives (pg. 2). Such writing style emphasizes Farmer’s personal
engagement with and devotion to Haiti, and also makes the book more comprehensible and enjoyable
by offering both a personal and a professional/medical analysis of the situation. Combined with photos
of victims and Port-au-Prince after the quake, Farmer’s narrative offers readers the opportunity to
better understand and sympathize with the Haitian people. Hopefully, some readers may even choose
to get involved with Haiti’s reconstruction.

The second part of the book is comprised of several narratives belonging to Farmer’s wife,
colleagues, friends, victims, and volunteers – all of which offer additional perspectives on Haiti before
and after the earthquake occurred. One of the most disturbing descriptions is provided by Farmer’s
Haitian wife, Didi Bertrand Farmer. In the narrative “Mothers and Daughters of Haiti,” she writes about an issue that was less evident in the media images: the struggle of women and girls living in and around the settlements of Port-au-Prince. Besides lacking basic human needs such as food, water, and proper shelter, girls and women faced extra risks of sexual violence and exploitation. Additional essays from people “on the ground” offer interesting and captivating information. Importantly, Haitian people are given a voice in this book; Farmer himself recognizes this importance when he asks, “Is it appropriate for a physician, an American at that, to speak for the victims?” (pg.3). He therefore acknowledges that perspectives coming from different people (often belonging to diverse ethnic and social backgrounds) offer more insight, as well as strongly support and legitimize Farmer’s arguments and analysis.

_Haiti after the Earthquake_ is an inspiring book that offers great information and motivates the reader to stand by and sympathize with the Haitian people. This book manages to remind us of the economic and social injustices that placed Haiti at such high risk even before the occurrence of the earthquake in 2010.

**Book Information**

_Haiti after the Earthquake_

By Paul Farmer (2011)

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