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To give or not to give: Ethics after the tsunami

By Ole Bjerg

Barely had the devastating waters of the great Tsunami withdrawn from the beaches of Thailand, Indonesia and other Southeast Asian countries before the area was struck by another flood. The international community in the form of both individuals, organisations and nations reacted promptly to the catastrophe by sending massive amounts of aid and money to help its victims. The powerful and destructive forces of nature were countered by almost equally powerful constructive social forces. But what was the nature of these social forces?

At first glance one might take the reactions of the international community to the tsunami catastrophe as expressions of a globally mediated form of ethics. The natural disaster seems to have generated an ethical solidarity, which we may have thought impossible in a globalised world. According to the great sociologist of postmodernity, Zygmunt Bauman, moral sentiments are founded on face-to-face relationships between individuals and when these relationships are lifted out of their immediate contexts and mediated across time and space, morality is lost in the process (Bauman 1993). But are the reactions and feelings from the international community towards the tsunami victims not proof that ethics and compassion can be mediated, even on a global scale?

The purpose of this article is to present a number of questions contesting the interpretation, that Western engagement after the tsunami catastrophe was driven by a purely ethical compassion.

Why not Darfur?

The world is full of catastrophes. Why particularly did the victims of the tsunami become the centre of attention and

compassion of the entire world? Why not the victims in Darfur or Iraq? Measured by the amount of human suffering both of these catastrophes easily live up to the tsunami.

Every catastrophe has an element of fascination and attraction. The catastrophe is an articulation of some of the basic existential conditions of being such as death, grief, hunger and disease. And so the catastrophe in all its misery is an articulation of the basic meaning of being. To most people in the Western welfare states death, grief, hunger and serious disease are relatively rare and rather distant phenomena and they are not part of our daily lives. The unbearable lightness of being lulls one into a state of existential numbness and boredom in which it may be difficult to feel that you are really alive. It is a state of existential emptiness or meaninglessness. Catastrophes, most often in distant parts of the world, however give us the opportunity to experience by proxy that existential intensity, which has been lost in our social democratic daily lives. The chorus of the Danish pop song recorded to raise funds for the victims of the tsunami was "it reminds us how small we are". This almost sounds like a pop

paraphrase of the founding father of existentialism, Martin Heidegger, when he speaks of "the call of being disclosing Dasein as an authentic Being-towards-death thrown into the world" (Heidegger 1927). So even if catastrophes are connected with poverty and need they do hold a certain "richness of meaning".

What distinguishes the tsunami from other catastrophes such as the ones in Darfur, Iraq and Gaza is the "simplicity" of the event. Getting engaged in the situations in Darfur, Iraq or Gaza, one is soon faced with a complex network of intersecting and often mutually contradictory political, economical, juridical, religious and historical explanations, reasons and conflicts. And it is impossible to identify the innocent victims, the evil perpetrators and the courageous heroes. Furthermore, we may also risk being forced to consider our own role in the situation, since we, as Westerners, are often a responsible part of these catastrophes due to our political and economic engagement in the areas in question.

In the case of the tsunami, on the contrary, we have a very simple and apolitical situation with a lot of completely

innocent victims, no responsibility or guilt to be placed and no historical or political reasons to point back to ourselves. This opens the possibility of a very uncomplicated and relatively cost free (apart from the 200 Danish krone one may donate) identification with and compassion for the victims. A rare and very welcome opportunity in an ever more complex world. The tsunami catastrophe is, in other words, existentially attractive since it allows us to draw meaning from the incident without having to pay the price of either direct suffering or indirect political responsibility.

Why not India?

By engaging ourselves in a catastrophe for which we bear no responsibility whatsoever and making donations to its victims, we (the West) position ourselves in the place of the seemingly altruistic giver. Marcel Mauss' seminal anthropological study of *The Gift* (1924) should, however, remind us, that gift giving is often not as neutral and altruistic, as it might seem at first glance. Giving a gift establishes a reciprocal relationship. If the receiver cannot repay the gift the relationship turns hierarchical. The receiver's inability of producing a gift of equal value is a demonstration of his inferiority and a respective confirmation of the giver's superiority. This relationship is only strengthened when the receiver is even dependent on the gift.

Donating money and aid to the countries struck by the tsunami gives us a feeling of being needed. In a culture praising individuality and independence as core virtues, the feeling that somebody depends on you can be a rare and often missed experience. Furthermore,

if we look at the content of our "gifts", something else is revealed about the nature of the relationship established. Not only do the victims of the Tsumani need us. They need us for something that lies particularly at the heart of the constitution of Western culture: money and technology. They need us for something that is particularly Western, particularly us. The reciprocal relationship established by the giving of these "gifts" is therefore not only a satisfaction for the individual giver but at the same time an affirmation of the superiority of Western culture.

In this connection it is interesting to note how India refused to receive aid from the international community of willing donors, among these their former colonial ruler, Britain. By refusing these gifts India refused to once again enter into the subordinate role of a helpless developing country dependent on foreign benevolence. Instead the refusal is the expression of a newly gained Indian self-consciousness of strength and independence. However, in our newspapers we can now read stories of the insufficiency of the aid provided by the Indian government to the victims among its own people. Recently inhabitants of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands were reported by the BBC to have received compensations of amounts as ridiculously low as 2 rupees. One may ask whether the public indignation generated by these stories springs from a true solidarity with the poor Indians or from an annoyance with the Indian government's reluctance to confirm the British's position as benevolent givers?

To give or not to give

The argument of the present article is not that international



Jokersen (a Danish rap musician) reminding us "How small we are" and encouraging us to make our donations via phone or SMS. *Photo: TV2*

engagement in helping the victims of the tsunami is wholly devoid of ethics and solidarity. And the normative implications are not that we shouldn't give aid to people victimised by catastrophes of different kinds. The point is, however, that we should beware of making ourselves believe that our engagement in catastrophes around the globe is driven purely by ethical sentiments. What is at stake is internal and not external to global relations of power and recognition. We should also not think that buying indulgence by making donations to "existentially comfortable" apolitical catastrophes like the tsunami excuses us from a more political engagement in more complex catastrophes, such as the ones in Darfur, Iraq, Gaza etc., where our role and responsibility as Westerners is of a somewhat more ambivalent character.

References

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