

## Quaking

by Ian Balfour

Of the numerous topics about which Walter Benjamin chose in the late 1920s and early 1930s to address children in a series of radio talks, a good many turned on disasters of one sort or another: the destruction of Pompeii, the flooding of the Mississippi, a railway accident in Scotland, and the Lisbon Earthquake of 1755. Benjamin sensed that his young audience would have had an appetite for large-scale catastrophes, even or maybe especially if these events were remote in time and space. Non-military shock and awe. His short talk on the Lisbon Earthquake resonates to this day, even if the point of departure, the earthquake that shocked not only Portugal but also all of Enlightenment Europe and points beyond, is, as it were, “history.”

In his little talk for kids, Benjamin explicitly avoids the strategy of giving a straightforward account of the facts in their sequence, reasoning that it might make the Lisbon earthquake—extraordinary and even unique—resemble other earthquakes and besides, that approach, he says, wouldn’t be “fun”! What then is his idea of fun when recounting and accounting for the earthquake and its consequences? Three things mainly: a richly descriptive eyewitness account from an Englishman living in Lisbon, a half-baked theory of how earthquakes occur because the earth is slowing cooling down, and a little bit on the shock waves the earthquake sent through Enlightenment thinking, not least for the twenty-four year old Immanuel Kant who wrote a suite of essays on earthquakes and, in particular, what could easily then have been called “the big one.”

Earthquakes give people pause, and perhaps philosophers more than most. These eruptions are occasions to rethink the nature of things and, in the eighteenth century, this had to do primarily with the question of God’s role in creating and maintaining what at the extreme was conceived as “the best of all possible worlds.” Events such as the Lisbon earthquake, which left a city in rubble and likely more than fifty thousand people dead, were hard to reconcile with the rational image of a God watching over all things.

If the Lisbon earthquake shook many people’s faith in a providential force, the earthquakes of the twenty-first century have sent fewer people in the direction of a god or gods, but there is still a right-wing(nut) fringe with millions of avid listeners (radio!) and readers. Thus we “learned” from some evangelical corners that Haiti was being punished for its pact with the devil in the days of revolt in Santo Domingo, when Toussaint L’Ouverture and his fellow islanders revolted against the French colonizers, the same French who had only recently proclaimed “liberty, equality, fraternity” and formulated the universal rights of man and of the citizen. The Haitian earthquake of 2010 was a natural, non-providential event if there ever was one—and there was. But it was also a political

event or an event that demanded politics, possibly a new and different politics in a country with a vexed history born of (neo-)colonialism and poverty. The possibilities in the wake of the earthquake have been hobbled from the start by the destruction of so much infrastructure, even down to a whole host of government buildings, creating a protracted bureaucratic nightmare from which a new history, a history to be written, is trying to awake.

The earthquake erupted while the tsunami of the near world-wide, man-made (and I do mean “man”) financial crisis was still being felt. The two seemingly unrelated phenomena combined to throw each other into relief. When the world’s media spotlight was turned to Haiti, certain aspects of its dire situation emerged all the more forcefully, given the stark economic facts. One was reminded that the entire annual Gross Domestic Product of Haiti in 2009 was estimated at 6.5 billion dollars, a figure equal to roughly a third of the bonus pool for Goldman Sachs in the same year, just the bonus pool, mind you, not the regular compensation for a single major financial concern whose maneuvers just prior to that helped precipitate the crisis in the first place. There should be some scale against which one can measure the magnitude of such discrepancies.

The outpouring of aid to Haiti from around the world was impressive but one wonders why it is almost only the large-scale disasters that elicit such responses when the disasters of daily life are arguably in some respects more compelling, if not as spectacular. Personal and other coffers were opened across the globe and even, perhaps surprisingly, in the United States, in spades. (Much as with Hurricane Katrina. But were monies directed, at a tiny fraction of the cleanup costs, to bolster the levees that could have prevented the destruction of New Orleans before the catastrophe?) Earthquakes can be great levelers: they tend to the revolutionary and the democratic because for a perhaps fleeting moment all people, reduced to bare life or not much more, are re-created as equals, all subject to forces of nature utterly beyond their control. (A shack, of course, will collapse a little easier than a mansion but, still, both could be just as completely razed, both equally reduced to rubble.)

The remarkable outpouring of worldwide support included substantial financial and material aid: even unlikely sources such as the International Monetary Fund forgave 268 million dollars of debt (perhaps thinking the money would never be forthcoming) but also proffered a 60 million dollar loan, interest-free at first, and then at a very low rate thereafter. An excellent hoax website claimed that France was belatedly planning not only to forgive Haiti’s debt but also to pay 22 billion dollars in reparations, partly calculated in relation to the 90 million gold francs Haiti was forced to pay France in 1804 for its independence—which should have been, one would like to have thought, free of charge. The cost of freedom? Priceless.

The dream of a revolution often, as in France of 1789, entails a fantasy of *tabula rasa*, of starting from scratch, jettisoning all the power-laden shackles of history writ large and small. The brand new calendar in France, with history beginning all over, was only the most obvious emblem of that. But, in the Haiti of 2010, the slate was cleared too thoroughly—so much was devastated that the effort of rebuilding is all the more monumental a task. Still, does the leveling of so many things present an opening, an “*ouverture*,” as Toussaint so aptly re-named himself?

Not everyone takes away the same lessons from earthquakes. William James, experiencing the earthquake of 1906 in northern California, took the shaking of foundations to be a literal equivalent of the absence of solid foundations for a metaphysical system: hence, the necessity of pragmatism. It is not unlike the lesson Benjamin adduced from the Lisbon earthquake and the science to which it later seemed to give rise: that the surface of the earth was in a state of “perpetual turmoil.” Benjamin notes that the sensitive instruments monitoring earthquakes in his time are never entirely still. No day, no hour without an earthquake. An allegory of the political.