
IN DEATH, IMPERIALISM LIVES ON

Jeremy Seabrook

The number of fishing boats from Sumatra, Sri Lanka and Tamil Nadu at sea when the Boxing Day tsunami hit will never be known. There is scarcely any population tally of the crowded coasts. Nameless people are consigned to unmarked graves; in mosques and temples, makeshift mortuaries, people pull aside a cloth, a piece of sacking, to see if those they loved lie beneath. As in all natural disasters, the victims are overwhelmingly the poorest.

This time there was something different. The tsunami struck resorts where westerners were on holiday. For the western media, it was clear that their lives have a different order of importance from those that have died in thousands, but have no known biography, and, apparently, no intelligible tongue in which to express their feelings. This is not to diminish the trauma of loss of life, whether of tourist or fisherman. But when we distinguish between “locals” who have died and westerners, “locals” all too easily becomes a euphemism for what were once referred to as natives. Whatever tourism’s merits, it risks reinforcing the imperial sensibility.

For this sensibility has already been reawakened by all the human-made, preventable catastrophes. The ruins of Galle and Bandar Aceh called forth images of Falluja, Mosul and Gaza. Imperial powers, it seems, anticipate the destructive capacity of nature. A report on ITN news made this explicit, by referring to “nature’s shock and awe.” But while the tsunami death toll rises in anonymous thousands, in Iraq disdainful American authorities don’t do body counts. One of the most poignant sights of recent days was that of westerners overcome with gratitude that they had been helped by those who had lost everything, but still regarded them as guests. When these same people appear in the West, they become the interloper, the unwanted migrant, the asylum seeker, who should go back to where they belong.

A globalisation that permits the wealthy to pass effortlessly through borders confines the poor to an impoverishment that seems to have no end. People rarely say that poor countries are swamped by visitors, even though their money power pre-empts the best produce, the clean water and amenities unknown to the indigenous population.

In death there should be no hierarchy. But even as Sri Lankans wandered in numb disbelief through the corpses, British TV viewers were being warned that scenes that they were about to witness might distress them. What are the daily visitations of grief and loss in places where people earn less in a year than the price that privilege pays for a night’s stay in a five-star hotel?

Western governments, which can disburse so lavishly in the art of war, offer a few million as if it were exceptional largesse. Fortunately the people are wiser; and the spontaneous outpourings of humanity have been as unstoppable as the waves that broke on south Asia’s coasts; donations rapidly exceeded the amount offered by government. Selflessness and sacrifice, people working away at rubble with bare hands, suggest immediate human solidarities.

Such events remind us of the sameness of our human destiny, the fragility of our existence. They place in perspective the meaning of security. Life is always at the mercy of nature - whether from such overwhelming events as this, or the inevitability of death. Yet we inhabit systems of social and economic injustice that exacerbate the insecurity of the poor, while the west is prepared to lay waste distant towns and cities in the name of a security that, in the end, eludes us all.

Assertions of our common humanity occur only at times of great loss. Too hold on to it at all other times - that would be something of worth to salvage these scenes of desolation. ■

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