

# The Big Truck That Went By: How the World Came to Save Haiti and Left Behind a Disaster

by Jonathan Katz.

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## ***The Big Truck That Went By: How the World Came to Save Haiti and Left Behind a Disaster* by Jonathan Katz (review)**

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REVIEW

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**In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:**

Reviewed by:

*Alyssa Goldstein Sepinwall*

*The Big Truck That Went By: How the World Came to Save Haiti and Left Behind a Disaster.* By Jonathan Katz. New York: St. Martin's Press, 2014. ISBN 9781137278975. 336 pp. \$18 paperback.

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Jonathan Katz's *The Big Truck That Went By* received a great deal of attention when it appeared in 2013. Katz, the only full-time US journalist in Haiti at the time of the 2010 earthquake, had broken several important stories about Haiti. These included the first news reports to the United States that an earthquake had happened, and later identifying MINUSTAH soldiers from Nepal as the source of Haiti's deadly cholera outbreak. *The Big Truck That Went By* won numerous prizes, and was named a top book of the year by the *Christian Science Monitor*, *Kirkus Reviews* and [Amazon.com](http://Amazon.com). Katz was interviewed about it on MSNBC, *Al-Jazeera*, and numerous public radio shows. **[End Page 231]**

The book's coverage begins in late 2008 with a previous disaster, the collapse of a school in Port-au-Prince. It continues through the elections of 2011, with a brief discussion of the Caracol industrial park and the dismissal of charges against Jean-Claude Duvalier in 2012. Katz explains the predominance of NGOs in Haiti, and how foreign governments' preference for giving aid to these organizations rather than to the Haitian government has led to a weakened state. As Katz notes, the Haitian state is often powerless in the face of NGOs' desires: "The aid groups' power to act without oversight or accountability was almost absolute. There was no way for Haitians to appeal an NGO decision, prosecute a bad soldier, or vote an unwanted USAID project out of a neighborhood" (51). Katz adds that UN soldiers in Haiti are paid much more than the country's own police, and are proportionately much more powerful.

In many ways, specialists in Haitian studies are not Katz's target audience. Katz's lively prose seeks to show general readers who donated to Haitian earthquake relief "where your \$20 went" (4). He also wants to explain to readers "how a massive humanitarian effort . . . could cause so much harm and heartache" (4). Furthermore, he wants US consumers to

understand their complicity in the forces reshaping Haiti, and that the “low-wage Haitian garment industry would not exist . . . if [they] were willing to pay more for their clothes” (278). Katz does not presume any background knowledge among his readers; he sketches the basic contours of Haitian history, society, and culture. Another way in which the book seems aimed at a general audience is its form. The book is presented not as an impersonal scholarly analysis, but as a first-person memoir, in which Katz recounts his experiences in the earthquake’s wake alongside the story of his falling in love with an NYU grad student in Haiti (who later became his wife).

Certainly, Katz is not the first person to analyze the failure of reconstruction in Haiti, let alone the shortcomings of NGOs and of the neoliberal economy. Numerous scholars have called attention to these issues since the earthquake (for instance Pierre Buteau, Rodney Saint-Éloi and Lyonel Trouillot, eds., *Refonder Haiti?* [2010]; Martin Munro, ed., *Haiti Rising* [2010]; Paul Farmer, *Haiti after the Earthquake* [2011]; Mark Schuller and Pablo Morales, eds., *Tectonic Shifts* [2012]; Mark Schuller, *Killing with Kindness* [2012]; Jean-Germain Gros, *State Failure, Underdevelopment, and Foreign Intervention in Haiti* [2012]; and Beverly Bell, *Fault Lines* [2013]).<sup>1</sup> In addition to these works, Katz covers much of the same ground as Raoul Peck’s film *Assistance mortelle* (*Fatal Assistance*), which recorded the mistakes of foreign agencies while they were being made. It is thus an overstatement to call *The Big Truck That Went By* “THE book on Haiti’s devastating **[End Page 232]** earthquake and its bungled reconstruction,” as one blurb on the book’s back cover does.

And yet there are many ways in which Katz adds substantially to existing literature; in my view, several aspects of the book deserve careful reading by Haitian studies specialists. First, the book is highly suited for the classroom. Katz is a terrific writer, and brings...

petty traders of the major core capitalist firms, is thus likely to oppose any fundamental shift of resource expenditures from the industrial sector to the rural areas" (171). Additionally, one must consider that "whenever the masses have risen, they have confronted the repressive apparatus of the state and, frequently, imperial opposition too" (56). Of course, Fatton is aware of the issue of co-optation and the lack of financial resources.

Although Robert Fatton Jr. pinpoints prevailing concerns, he does not suggest ways for Haiti to remove itself from the outer periphery or "build back better," to use Bill Clinton's famous phrase, with the participation of the bourgeoisie. Perhaps he did not provide a blueprint because he realizes that the status quo and the "inequalities are pronounced and leave little room for social mobility" (56). This book, while largely analytical, could nonetheless serve as a principled and thoughtful policymaking tool if the international partners were interested in ensuring that democracy is rooted within a credible and stable institutional cadre that would place issues of security at the summit of an uncompromising agenda about participatory democracy and nation-state sovereignty. However, as Fatton reminds us, "Haiti's so-called international partners will not change course on behalf of the island nation" (176). Indeed, Haitians must chart their own history, but they must also eradicate banditry by certain members of the nonproductive bourgeoisie that are impeding progress and creating more of a mafia state than a democratic one.

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