The earthquake that struck Haiti on January 12, 2010, will forever be remembered as one of the world’s deadliest disasters. For 30 seconds the earth shook and reduced a nation—already struggling with the historical weight of slavery, underdevelopment, imperialism, and intense internal divisions—to rubble. One in seven people were suddenly rendered homeless, while more than 300,000 lost their lives, according to official estimates.

Haiti dominated the airwaves and cyberspace for weeks, bombarding world citizens with words and images at once contradictory, controversial, consuming, and ultimately confusing. The earthquake seemed to have as many meanings as people with access to a blog. In this Report, we aim to sort out critical perspectives on the disaster. As each of the articles herein show, understanding the disaster means understanding not only the tectonic fault lines running beneath Haiti but also the deep economic, political, social, and historical cleavages within and surrounding the country.

We begin with sociologist Alex Dupuy’s political-economic analysis. His critique centers on how neoliberal policies imposed since the 1980s—the lowering of tariffs, the building of free-trade zones, and the progressive undermining of the Haitian state—all amplified the quake’s destructive effects. The reconstruction amounts to a gold mine for foreign interests as what remains of Haiti’s sovereignty is undermined once again in a new cycle of disaster capitalism.

Guest editor Mark Schuller’s dispatch from Haiti’s tent cities of displaced people provides a glimpse of how large, private NGOs distribute aid with little democratic practice or participation. The conditions within the camps, he argues, challenge mainstream understandings of human rights—which must be reconceptualized as not only individual but collective, and not only civil but social. Schuller includes two testimonies from women leaders whose experiences in the camps reveal the shortcomings of NGO-ized aid, forms of exclusion and social violence, and the courage and resilience of Haiti’s survivors.

Veteran solidarity activist Beverly Bell reports on the still-vibrant and defiant grassroots progressive movement in Haiti. Charting the exclusion of the Haitian state from the international community—mirrored by the state’s own exclusion of Haitian citizens—Bell reports on the many forms of solidarity and emergency response that went unnoticed, unacknowledged, and unpaid. She offers numerous quotes about the hopes of a movement that has resisted foreign capitalist designs to “construct” (and not merely reconstruct) the country, citing principles for reconstruction put forth by numerous activists.

Anthony Oliver-Smith, a longtime disaster expert, looks at Haiti’s earthquake through the lens of political ecology, vulnerability, and Haitian history. Comparing the damage of Haiti’s quake with that of other disasters in Latin America, Oliver-Smith argues that disasters are historical processes, and that the earthquake’s destructiveness was the material expression of contradictions in the country’s social structure, policies of exclusion, and legacy of economic underdevelopment. Like a similar event 30 years ago in Peru, Oliver-Smith writes, Haiti’s is a “500-year earthquake.”

Finally, anthropologist Gina Athena Ulysse offers a historically engaged analysis of the U.S. media’s narrative framing of the earthquake. She uncovers a nearly seamless, racialized dehumanization of Haiti and Haitian people, one that draws upon narratives and stereotypes dating back to the 19th century, when the great powers deliberately relegated the black republic to a marginal position within the world system to punish Haiti for its “transgression”: overthrowing slavery and colonial rule. Ulysse furthermore analyzes the contemporary impacts of this Othering discourse, which ranges from Bill Clinton’s cultural illiteracy, the wide gulf between Haiti’s poor majority and the state apparatus, and, chillingly, the most systematic eradication of Haiti’s popular religion to date.

A collection of essays on an event like this by necessity excludes more than it can include; we have attempted here to present perspectives on the disaster that have been largely marginalized from mainstream discourse. We hope they will stimulate further conversation and analysis, and that they will help readers to reframe the public conversation and inform their solidarity work.