

# A Haitian boat disaster

**E**very now and then something happens which serves to illuminate with particular clarity the way our newspapers distinguish between what counts as news and what does not. Consider the way the British press handled two very different disappearances, on the nights of 3 and 4 May 2007.

In early May two British doctors, Kate and Gerry McCann, were on holiday in the Portuguese resort of Praia da Luz. On the night of 3 May 2007 they went out to dinner at a tapas bar near their hotel, leaving their three-year-old daughter Madeleine behind with their two other young children. At some point that evening, Madeleine left or was abducted from their unlocked apartment, and she hasn't been seen since.

Nobody who lived within reach of the British or indeed European media in the late spring of 2007 is likely to forget its extraordinary response to this event. Madeleine McCann's disappearance remained one of the lead stories in most of the British papers for a full week, and immediately became the object of obsessive national attention. The phrase 'Madeleine McCann' appears in no less than 164 articles published by the *Guardian* newspaper between 4 May and 13 July, an average of two or three articles per day. Tabloid papers like *News of the World* and *The Sun* still strive to outdo each other in their commitment to 'leave no stone unturned', to use the phrase adopted by the official website of 'Madeleine's Fund' (a site that apparently received 58 million hits and 16,000 messages of support within 48 hours of its launch on 16 May). Author J.K. Rowling and her publishers recently instructed every shop in the world that wants to sell the latest Harry Potter book to put up posters of Madeleine asking 'Have you seen this child?'

The night after the world's most visible missing person vanished, early on 4 May 2007, at least eighty other people disappeared when a boat sank in the Caribbean. This time British authorities were directly involved in the disaster, and there is good reason to suspect that the deaths may have been the result of criminal negligence, if not deliberate police violence. Some of the dead were eaten by sharks; many were women and children. A UK government enquiry is currently under way and the publication of its report is due in August. How many stones might we expect newspapers like the *Guardian* or *Independent* to overturn in their coverage of such a story?

Before answering this question it is worth remembering what actually happened on the night of 3–4 May. On Wednesday 2 May, a 25-foot sloop set out from the northern Haitian city of Cap-Haïtien, heading for the neighbouring Turks and Caicos Islands. US and UK officials estimate that it was crammed with around 160 people. These were people who had decided to abandon the certainty of crippling destitution at home in exchange for a one-in-a-million shot at a precarious low-wage job abroad. Haiti is a country where, according to the best available study, around 75 per cent of the population 'lives on less than \$2 per day, and 56 per cent – 4.5 million people – live on less than \$1 per day'. Punitive international trade and financial arrangements ensure that such destitution will remain a structural fact of Haitian life for the foreseeable future. Every serious political attempt to allow Haiti's people to move (in ex-president Jean-Bertrand Aristide's phrase) 'from absolute misery to a dignified poverty' has been violently and deliberately blocked by the US government and its allies in the international community. As a result, in a normal year, an average of around a thousand of Haiti's most desperate or most reckless citizens try to escape this misery by sea, first selling whatever few possessions they might have accumulated in order to pay the hundreds of dollars that traffickers charge for passage on a boat.

The Turks and Caicos Islands are the sort of small British overseas territory that until 1981 went by the more accurate name of 'Crown colony'. They are located north of Haiti and south-east of the Bahamas. London is responsible for their security, defence and foreign affairs. Legal T&C residents are full British citizens, although a large proportion of local 'belongers' take advantage of their island's much-hyped offshore status to avoid paying full rates of British tax. Per capita income in T&C is around \$10,000. According to online tourist brochures, T&C is 'one of the most popular destinations for Hollywood Stars'. In recent years, it has also become a popular destination for impoverished Haitian emigrants. In T&C, as in Florida or the Dominican Republic, it is legal and illegal Haitian workers who take on most of the poorly paid jobs in construction, street-cleaning and hotel maintenance. As the numbers of would-be migrants have risen in recent years, so has the violence of the police response. Among other incidents, in 1998 another boat-load of escaping Haitians died off the shore, after the police fired at their boat.

Both the US and UK governments have long treated Haitian migrants with exceptional severity. Whereas Clinton's so-called 'wet foot, dry foot' policy still facilitates the naturalization of many Cuban emigrants, Haitian migrants to the USA cannot even apply for the 'temporary protected status' occasionally enjoyed by the citizens of countries like Honduras or El Salvador when their homes are threatened by war or natural disaster. Almost without exception, the US Coast Guard immediately and automatically repatriates every Haitian migrant or asylum-seeker that it intercepts at sea.

Around 4 a.m. on Friday 4 May, the Cap Haitien sloop was intercepted by the T&C Islands' police launch *Sea Quest*, about half a mile south of Providenciales Island. What happened next is the subject of some controversy. The survivors say that the T&C launch rammed the boat, and then tried to tow it further out to sea. Moments later the bow was dragged under and the sloop capsized. Many of its passengers were unable to swim. The luckiest survivors claim that T&C police left them waiting in the water for around fifteen minutes; others 'alleged that police beat them with wooden batons when they tried to scramble aboard the patrol boat from the shark-filled waters'. Associated Press (AP) went on to note, on 8 May, that 'reports about the alleged involvement of the Turks and Caicos boat [in the disaster] have taken days to come out because the survivors are locked in a jail-like detention centre and barred from speaking to the media.'

The T&C police initially claimed that the boat had already capsized before they arrived on the scene. A little later they changed their story (after some gentle prompting from US Coast Guard personnel who assisted in the rescue operation), acknowledging that the boat sank as they tried to tow it into port through 'heavy seas'. Between them, the T&C and US coastguards managed to pick up 78 survivors. A total of 61 dead bodies were also recovered at the same time, though the real death toll was probably closer to 90 people. It was the worst disaster to befall Haitian migrants in recent years.

In line with standard procedures, after spending almost a week in detention the survivors were forcibly transferred back to Cap Haitien. The badly decomposed bodies of the dead followed them home ten days later. In a final insult, in a country where life is so desperately cheap and many Haitians take funerals extremely seriously, the bodies were dumped into a common grave before relatives had time to identify and reclaim them (AP, 21 May). Pending the publication of their report in August, investigators from the Marine Accident Investigation Branch (MAIB) of the UK's Department of Transport 'concluded that while the two vessels had touched, there was no evidence to support claims that the migrants' boat had been rammed'. Richard Mull, the lead British investigator, acknowledged that 'the decision to tow the overcrowded sloop in stormy seas without giving the migrants life jackets also raised concerns, but said Turks and Caicos police were following the standard operating procedure' (AP, 8 May).

A government that refuses to contemplate prosecution of its police when they execute an innocent bystander, like Jean Charles de Menezes in July 2005, is not likely to worry too much about standard operating procedures that kill people who are guilty

of being both black and poor. However, anyone with even a little experience of boats knows that when you tow an unstable and heavily laden vessel through heavy seas it is virtually guaranteed to sink. The British MAIB investigators more or less admitted as much in their initial report. There may thus be some grounds for questioning a government that defends such a procedure as 'standard', especially when it is applied to scores of terrified and exhausted people in shark-filled waters in the middle of the night, without first trying to offload any of them onto another vessel and without providing them with life-preservers or assistance of any kind.

But what questions were raised in the British press? As far as I can tell, neither the *Daily Telegraph* nor the *Guardian* ever mentioned the event. The *Observer*, the Sunday paper that belongs to the Guardian group, had by 15 July devoted a grand total of 135 words to the story, clipped from a single Associated Press wire, published on 6 May 2007. The *Independent* has likewise published just one short article about the disaster, on 12 May, a full week after the story broke. *The Times* dispatched it in a single two-sentence snippet from the AP on 11 May. Their coverage reads as follows: 'Survivors of a sunken boat carrying 160 Haitian migrants said that a Turks and Caicos coastal patrol rammed their vessel, towed it into deeper water and abandoned them. At least 61 people died.' End of story. So far no British newspaper has bothered to investigate the truth of such claims, let alone consider the implications of this indifference.

Peter Hallward

## LETTERS

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I trust that my pleasure in finding Adorno's writings on music taken so seriously in a journal of philosophy will not seem dimmed by my referring back to issue 143 (Ben Watson, *DJ rottweiler*, review of Adorno's *Current of Music: Elements of a Radio Theory*, pp. 47–51).

Watson commends Adorno for restricting his analysis to what he knew. Watson's own domains of expertise are clearly those of the blues, jazz, rock and pop, and it would be good, for instance, to read a detailed analysis of the music of John Coltrane by him. When it comes to Adorno's 'polemic against the kind of analysis musicologists call "Schenkerian" (and everyone else calls those deadly dull lists of successive scherzos and rondos in classical sleeve notes)', however, he is so wide of the mark that one cannot help beginning to question his reliability on other matters, too. Schenker analysis is precisely the antithesis of such descriptive lists, being concerned to strip away the surface of themes, motifs, formal models like 'scherzo', even (and for this Schenker has been much criticized) rhythm, in order to uncover the underlying (and often deeply buried) structural skeleton common to all tonal pieces – or those that Schenker thought good – and to describe that skeleton by means that figure very rarely in sleeve notes: tonality, key-structure, species counterpoint.

I leave it to Ben Watson and others to relate such a theoretical, analytical and aesthetic endeavour to the socio-political sphere. But it is worth remembering that Adorno had studied composition with Alban Berg and was, therefore, at least on the fringes of the Schoenberg circle. Schoenberg disapproved of Schenker analysis precisely because it stripped away from music like Beethoven's *Eroica* symphony the surface events that he liked best; also, of course, because it does not work for atonal and twelve-note music such as his own. Schoenberg did not realize (and for this Schenker himself was to blame, for he neither explained, nor even probably realized himself) that the aesthetic consequence of his reductive method, as opposed to its normative aspect and its function in training musicians' ears and minds to perceive deep structures, was precisely to highlight the deviations of an individual piece's foreground from the universal background and thus account for their affective qualities. (See Leonard B. Meyer, *Emotion and Meaning in Music*, University of Chicago Press, 1956, for the classical

account of such implication-realization processes.) This, again, has sociological implications; but the point here is that the reasons Adorno, partly at least under Schoenberg's aegis, rejected Schenkerian theory and analysis were the opposite of those implied by Watson's remark, which applies rather to Adorno's scorn for 'music appreciation'.

As for 'ultra-modern "noise" rather than "music"', I trust Ben Watson is using 'noise' in the British Standard Glossary's sense of 'sound undesired by the recipient' and not in the acoustic sense of an aperiodic (indefinitely pitched) sound. If Watson means 'noise' in the acoustic sense, he might rather have cited Varèse's *Déserts* and *Le Poème électronique* as antecedents and works by such composers as Lachenmann today. As for 'ultra-modern', Zimmermann died in 1970; the aesthetic of his later music, involving a tapestry of quotations from other music, may have been ultra-modern at one time, but is now a commonplace of postmodernism, and the style of his music derives from the expressionism of Schoenberg and Berg.

**Michael Graubart**

## REPLY

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It is heartening when *Radical Philosophy* does its job, and garners a protest from a champion of unreflecting specialism. Nevertheless, Michael Graubart's flip comment about leaving the 'socio-political sphere' to 'others' remains disgraceful. This was a pose Adorno targeted throughout his life, and with good reason: it's a fond illusion with atrocious consequences. I admit my words on Schenkerian analysis lay me open to criticism: viewed from the high towers of academic musicology, Schenker's 'deep' analyses are indeed the opposite of popular explanation. However, sleeve notes on classical releases are frequently written by Schenkerians, and – unlike a grounding in Adorno (or Leroi Jones) – such training doesn't allow them to escape descriptive formalism and articulate listener response. (Readers of *Radical Philosophy* will I hope be especially aware that, *contra* Graubart, 'individual deviation' and 'universal background' cannot constitute genuine alternatives – with Leonard B. Meyer on the side of the former and Heinrich Schenker on the side of the latter – but, like other well-worn couplets – figure and ground', 'agency and structure' – share the same transhistorical metaphysic.) As to Graubart's remark about my own competence to write about anything other than 'blues, jazz, rock and pop', I find it astonishing that anyone who professes to know about modern music can rest assured that these are known and watertight categories, both from each other and from the musics lionized by Adorno (whether these be called 'classical', 'serious', 'European', or – as I would contend – 'revolutionary'). Whoever would like to talk about John Coltrane had better not remain silent about Arnold Schoenberg and the crisis of bourgeois romanticism.

In my review I described hearing Siegfried Palm playing Bernd-Alois Zimmermann on the radio, not as a claim about Zimmermann's entire oeuvre – in the manner of those whose 'expertise' depends upon the ignorance of others – but to report an experience which made me question everything I knew about music. This kind of contingency and subjectivism – the real factual basis for an objective musical analysis – is of course inadmissible for the species of petty expertise claimed by Graubart. The final suggestion in his letter – that noise as 'undesired by the recipient' should be distinguished from indefinitely pitched sound ('nice noise', anyone?), and that I might check out Edgard Varèse and Helmut Lachenmann – evinces precisely the combination of retarded knowledge and blithe condescension which made me flee academia for music journalism (and then *Radical Philosophy*). The cataclysmic music of the Romanian composers Iancu Dumitrescu and Ana-Maria Avram will see all those who don't know their Black Sabbath – as well as their Beethoven – in a noisy hell of their own socio-political limits!

**Ben Watson**