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The Geopolitics of Global Health

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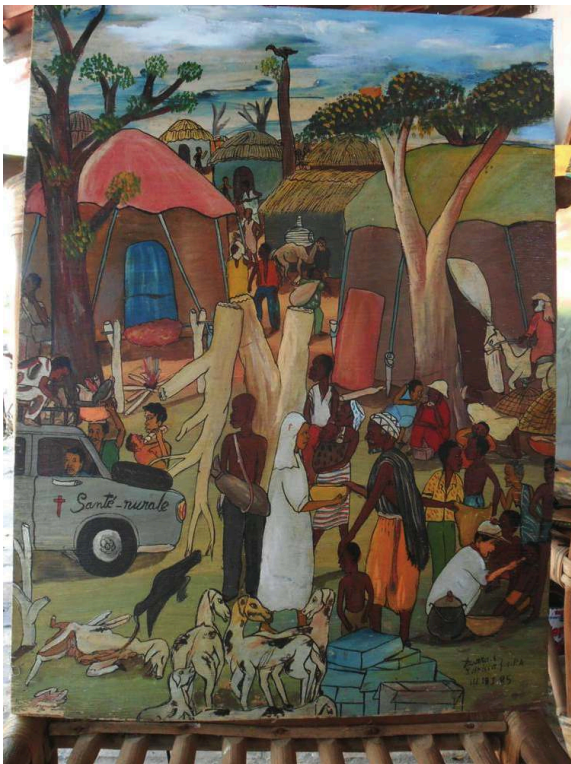
The Geopolitics of Global Health

Dominique Kerouedan

EDITOR'S NOTE

Excerpts from the Inaugural Lecture 14 February 2013

Source: La lettre, no. 36, May 2013



Caption: *Santé rurale*, Idrissa Diarra, Abidjan, ARR

- 1 **The international community readily recognizes that maternal health has received little political and financial attention, despite the United Nations Secretary General Ban Ki Moon making it a priority at the G8 Summit in Muskoka¹.**
- 2 From my experience in the field, I know that pregnant women are among the patients receiving the worst care, and are subjected to attitudes which anthropologists Jean-Pierre Olivier de Sardan² and Yannick Jaffré call “La Médecine inhospitalière” (“inhospitable medicine”)³.
- 3 Yet does maternity not take us to the heart of the philosophical questions, which makes humans an integral part of life itself and of the world? Is the disregard, sometimes until the death of the mother and of the child, not a reflection of societies’ degree of tolerance to women more generally? It seems that we do not grant all humans the same value. Reading Jean-Pierre Derriennic’s book on civil wars, Pierre Hassner was stunned to discover “the different value given by the major powers to the life of their nationals and to those of other humans, particularly in the Third World”⁴.
- 4 Be it in the field or at the international political level, it is difficult to maintain an independent stance when we analyse the situation or comment on it. Diplomatic immunity seems to induce intellectual immunity, which anesthetizes the curious and scientific mind, dialogue based on experience, in short, critical thinking, which Henri Bergson argued was “conducive to inspiring responsible behaviours”⁵. Were we allowed to think differently, here and over there, we would save decades. Whatever the global challenges, the future of humanity depends on men’s and women’s *ideas*, and on the rise of strategic minds.
- 5 The innovative, dematerialized ways of financing development do away with human relations. The realities of poor persons, let us face it, have become abstractions in Western capitals. Thus, globalization goes hand in hand with a paradoxical movement of expansion of the world which both distances humans from one another and dilutes them in the sphere of knowledge, as technology brings them closer in time through digital screens. Behind the sea of anonyms, do we distinguish faces, individual journeys, people like us?
- 6 Freedom and sovereignty are our most powerful weapons to oppose the industrial alcohol, food lobbies, and drug traffickers, to which we are otherwise toys. As Yvan Illich tells us, what constitutes each individual’s health is precisely their “personal autonomy”⁶, a rather remote proposition from the omerta that is often still imposed on the patient’s “singular dialogue” with their doctor. In the face of the powerlessness sometimes inflicted upon us by men and women insensitive to what they know about the risks of becoming infected with a deadly virus or sinking into addiction, it takes time to understand, thanks to Foucault’s argument about spirituality, that: “the truth is not given to the subject by a simple act of knowledge”, rather “the subject must become other than itself to have the right to access the truth”.

• Inaugural Lecture published by Éditions Fayard and online at www.books.openedition.org/cdf/2288.

• The video of the Inaugural Lecture is available online at www.college-de-france.fr, on the professor's page.

NOTES

1. United Nations Secretary General, *Global Strategy for Women's and Children's Health*, September 2010.
 2. J.-P. Olivier de Sardan, "La sage-femme et le douanier : cultures professionnelles locales et culture bureaucratique privatisée en Afrique de l'Ouest", in M. Raffinot and F. Roubaud (eds), *Les fonctionnaires du Sud entre deux eaux : sacrifiés ou protégés ?*, Autrepart 2001 (20) p. 61-73.
 3. Y. Jaffré and J.-P. Olivier de Sardan, *Une médecine inhospitalière. Les difficiles relations entre soignants et soignés dans cinq capitales d'Afrique de l'Ouest*, Karthala, Paris, 2003.
 4. J.-P. Derriennic, *Les guerres civiles*, Presses de Sciences Po, 2011.
 5. Henri Bergson was the first chairman of an international commission for cooperation between universities, academics, researchers and scientists, founded on the idea that education allows people to develop a critical mind that is conducive to inspiring responsible behaviours (which was to become the UNESCO).
 6. I. Illich, *Medical Nemesis: the Expropriation of Health*. Calder & Boyars, 1975.
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