Haiti and the False Promise of State Power

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Since the devastation of January 12, 2010, Haiti, more than any other Caribbean nation, has commanded the world's attention. Despite the wave of humanitarianism following the earthquake, poverty and political instability have persisted in the country. For years critical scholars have attributed Haiti's dismal socio-economic conditions to the involvement of international powers, particularly the United States. It is argued that the foreign policies of leading western countries, whether they are considered predatory or simply misguided, have impeded the establishment of meaningfully autonomous governance in the country. Such analyses establish the Haitian state as central to understanding the plight of the Haitian people. While it can certainly be argued that the Haitian state's lack of autonomy from external influence is the chief source of the country's condition, this essay will argue that the state is unlikely to be a source of solutions. This argument has implications for efforts to improve conditions within the country as it runs contrary to orthodox political strategies which emphasize the pursuit of state power.

This paper will first examine the contradictions of Haiti's independence by providing a brief historical overview of the external interventionism and internal authoritarianism which has constrained the freedom of the Haitian people. Secondly, the presidency of Jean-Bertrand Aristide will be presented in order to illustrate the continued constraints which effectively prevent the state from responding to the wishes and demands of the Haitian people. Next, the earthquake, the international response to it, and the country's recent flawed elections will be discussed. This will be followed by an examination of the Haitian state in theoretical context, which will outline the impediments to future leftist governance in Haiti proposing the development of political strategies aside from the pursuit of state power. All of this will be presented in

support of the argument that the Haitian state, though nominally independent, is subject to domestic and international constraints which prevent it from serving as an effective channel for the change which has been historically pursued by the Haitian populace. As a result, those seeking progressive change, pro-poor economic policy, and greater social equality, must resist the temptation to centre their political activity on the pursuit of state power.

The Contradictions of Haitian Independence

It is difficult to ignore the sad irony that, after being the second colony in the Americas to attain independence, Haiti's post-independence history has been one of foreign intervention and domestic authoritarianism. While space constraints prohibit an exhaustive account of this history (which can be found in the work of numerous scholars including Laurent Dubois) this section seeks to provide an historical overview highlighting key instances of foreign intervention and authoritarianism.[1] The San Domingo revolution, led by Toussaint L'Ouverture, spanned from 1791 to 1803 and culminated with the founding of the Haitian republic.[2] The success of the revolution is particularly notable because it was undertaken by an enslaved populace, unlike the elite-led revolutions of Latin America which would follow decades later. Unfortunately, the struggle for substantive independence in Haiti did not end with the revolution, and colonial domination continued under other names. As Peter Hallward argues, "the deeply subversive success of Haiti's revolution provoked both at home and abroad a counter-revolution that in many ways continues to this day."[3]

Haiti's experiences in the decades following its independence revolved around two simultaneous processes. First, the successful consolidation of economic and political power on the part of Haitian elites which began following the assassination of the revolutionary leader Jean Jacques Dessalines, whose plans for the country were deemed to be intolerably radical.[4] Secondly, Haiti's

[1] Laurent Dubois, *Haiti: The Aftershocks of History,* (New York, New York: Metropolitan Books, 2012)
[2] CLR James, *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L'Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution,* (Toronto, Ontario: Vintage Books, 1989)
[3] Peter Hallward, *Damming the Flood: Haiti and the Politics of Containment,* (New York and London: Verso, 2010), 12
[4] Ibid, 13

international debt, which continues to haunt the country to this day, began to be established.[5] It was not until the twentieth century, however, that Haiti was faced with an occupation by the United States.[6] Concerns about German influence in Haiti combined with the desire to establish regional hegemony informed the Wilson administration's decision to dispatch three hundred thirty soldiers to the country in July of 1915.[7] This began an occupation which would last until 1934 and cost thousands of Haitian lives.[8] This intervention demonstrated the linkages between US business interests and the behaviour of the US government which has remained an integral component of US-Haitian relations. The occupation was preceded by the United States' insistence on the establishment of a US administered customs receivership which would require the Haitian government to effectively surrender its sovereignty.[9] Frustrated with Haitian recalcitrance toward the idea of surrendering their own sovereignty, Roger Farnham, a banker working for the US government, stated that there were two potential leaders who would be acceptable, but they required US intervention to attain power.[10] With the intervention of 1915 and the subsequent occupation of the country, the United States signaled its willingness to usurp Haitian sovereignty in the interests of US capital.

Upon ending the occupation in 1934, the United States left power to a small group of Haitian elites backed by a US trained military force.[11] These forces governed the country until 1957 when François Duvalier, reinforced by his own militia, rose to power in fraudulent elections.[12] Duvalier appointed his son as his successor,

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[5] Ibid, 12

[6] This is not to suggest that the US was removed from Haitian politics in the eighteenth century. Numerous Naval interventions, for example, occurred to "protect American lives and property" between 1857 and 1892. Hans Schmidt, *The United States Occupation of Haiti 1915-1934,* (Rutgers University Press, 1995), 31

[7] Ibid, 67

[8] Ibid, 102

[9] Ibid, 60

[10] Farnham was the vice president of National City bank of New York, the vice president of the Banque Nationale in Haiti, and President of National Railway of Haiti. He was brought in to consult for state department. Ibid, 48. Regarding the potential leaders, see; Ibid, 61.

[11] Paul Farmer, *Haiti: After the Earthquake*, (New York, New York: PublicAffairs, 2011), 130

[12] Ibid

and Jean-Claude Duvalier ruled the country from 1971 to 1986.[13] While not beholden to traditional elite interests and less connected to US power than the preceding governments, the rule of the Duvalier's was certainly not consistent with any reasonable definition of freedom for the Haitian population.[14] Terror was systematically employed via the notorious *tonton-macoute*, and the initially populist rhetoric of François Duvalier belied the concessions to foreign-owned extractive industries established during the family's rule.[15] The systemic violence of the Duvalier governments combined with declining prospects in the agricultural sector further contributed to the exploitation of Haiti's workforce by precipitating significant migration to urban areas, providing a surplus labour supply for internationally owned factories.[16] Washington's approach to the Duvalier administration further illustrated the intent of the US government to control Haiti and its people regardless of the human costs. This was explicitly stated by John F. Kennedy's Secretary of State Dean Rusk. When considering the possibility of a replication of the Cuban Revolution in Haiti, Rusk admitted, "we ourselves cannot in good conscience say that this could be worse for the Haitians however damaging to US and cause of freedom in the Americas."[17](sic) Essentially, the United States committed itself to championing freedom in the Americas according to its own terms, even if it meant tolerating a dictatorship. As we shall see, defending freedom on American terms has been a consistent feature of US-Haiti relations even after the Cold War.

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[13] Ibid

[14] Many elites actually fled the country; Ibid. President John F. Kennedy appeared sympathetic to a 1963 effort by the Dominican Republic to depose Duvalier; Stephen J. Randall and Graeme S. Mount, *The Caribbean Basin: An International History*, (New York, New York: Routledge, 1998), 98. There was contestation within Kennedy administration regarding whether to accept the Duvalier regime. Stephen G. Rabe, *The Most Dangerous Area in the World: John F. Kennedy Confronts Communist Revolution in Latin America*, (University of North Carolina Press, 1999), 50

[15] It has been said that the tonton-makout "became the living symbols of Duvalierist coercion." Eric Caple James, *Democratic Insecurities: Violence, Trauma, and Intervention in Haiti,* (Berkeley and Los Angeles California: University of California Press, 2010), 58. Regarding concessions, see; Randall and Mount, *The Caribbean Basin,* 98

[16] Eric Caple James, Democratic Insecurity, 64-65

[17] Rabe, *The Most Dangerous Area in the World,* 50. Presumably "freedom" in the context of the Cold War was understood to mean anything but communism.

Jean-Bertrand Aristide and the Lavalas Movement

Following the expulsion of Jean-Claude Duvalier from Haiti in 1986 the military re-established direct control over the country.[18] The military government aligned itself with the United States and accelerated the neoliberal privatization programs prescribed by Washington and the leading international financial institutions, but struggled to establish stability despite a willingness to use authoritarian measures to repress social mobilizations.[19] The heavy handed tactics of the military ran contrary to the United States' ostensible commitment to democracy and by 1990, "the time had come to replace a pro-democratic military with a pro-military democrat."[20] These plans would be foiled, however, by the victory of a popular priest named Jean-Bertrand Aristide and his supporters in the Lavalas movement which had been mobilizing for years prior to the 1990 election.[21] Aristide's populist rhetoric and impoverished support-base raised fears amongst Haitian elites and US government agencies which quickly expressed concerns regarding plans to increase the minimum wage and amend the country's foreign exchange policies.[22] This US reaction to Aristide's election demonstrated that its stated commitment to democracy was qualified by a stronger commitment to open markets and the political status-quo.[23]

Needless to say, the election of Jean-Bertrand Aristide marked a moment of hope for a Haitian public which had endured decades - in fact centuries - of poverty and repression, but a successful coup perpetrated against the Aristide government in 1991 crushed this optimism and marked an era of renewed social conflict.[24] Following the coup, Aristide began appealing to the United States government in order to facilitate his return to office. His endeavour was ultimately successful, but came at a great cost. The US government was reluctant to allow a leftist and supposedly erratic leader to return and potentially challenge the socio-economic

[18] Hallward, *Damming the Flood,* 16
[19] Ibid, 29
[20] Ibid
[21] Ibid, 19
[22] Ibid, 37
[23] William Robinson argues that this has been a central component of US foreign policy in general in *Promoting Polyarchy: Globalization, US Intervention and Hegemony*, (New York, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996)
[24] Hallward, *Damming the Flood,* 39-40

status-quo. Nevertheless, as Haiti became an increasingly severe political headache for the Clinton government, the United States facilitated Aristide's return in September 1994 on the condition that he agree to amnesty for the coup perpetrators, the development of a US trained Haitian police force, and the establishment of a neoliberal structural adjustment program.[25] Essentially, in order to return to power, Aristide was forced to compromise many of the core principles of the Lavalas movement. As a result, the matter of how to judge Aristide's post-coup governance has been a topic of debate within the Haitian left and among critical scholars.[26] Regardless of how one interprets Aristide's governance, however, it is important to recognize that these constraints were externally imposed and precipitated by the reactionary capacities of Haiti's elites. Therefore, Aristide's return to office provides a stark illustration of the limits put on the Haitian state even when a leftist occupies the presidency.

Following a period of political competition, Aristide agreed to step aside in order to allow René Préval to run in the presidential election of 1996.[27] Préval assumed office with an overwhelming electoral victory, albeit with a low voter turnout, and occupied the presidency until the 2000 elections which saw the return of Aristide.[28] After results showed an overwhelming victory for Aristide and the Lavalas party, Aristide's political opponents and the US government began disputing the results of the election. As Peter Hallward puts it, "the Haitian people had again misunderstood the true meaning of democracy. They had failed to choose the leader that the great powers had chosen for them."[29] But the United States did not take military action, nor was there an immediate coup. Instead, the US began employing familiar economic tactics in order to undermine the Aristide government, including the suspension of aid to the country.[30] The human costs of such a decision should be self-evident, but the action also reveals the extent to which indebtedness and aid dependence has effectively served as yet another constraint on the Haitian state. This time Aristide was constrained not just by

[25] Ibid, 50-51
[26] For a perspective critical of the Duvalier government, see; Alex Dupuy, *The Prophet and the Power: Jean Bertrand Aristide, the International Community, and Haiti,* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2007). For a perspective more sympathetic to Aristide, see; Hallward, *Damming the Flood*
[27] Hallward, *Damming the Flood,* 62
[28] Ibid, 63
[29] Ibid, 78
[30] Ibid, 82

the conditions placed on his 1994 return, but the external crippling of the government's ability to fund anything that could come close to satisfying the wishes and demands of the Lavalas constituency. This effectively manufactured an escalation of internal opposition and discontent toward the Aristide government.

The difficulties faced by Aristide culminated in yet another coup on February 29, 2008. The particularities of the event vary greatly depending on which account one is presented with, and these debates are beyond the scope of this paper. What is not disputed is the fact that the events of February 29 included an international component, with the United States facilitating the exit of Aristide out of the country.[31] Immediately following Aristide's departure, Canadian, American, and French military forces began arriving to reinforce the American forces already present at the Port-au-Prince airport, again illustrating a willingness to exert direct military influence over the country if necessary.[32] Following Aristide's ouster, the country was governed by Gérard Latortue and following the 2006 elections, René Préval. These governments engaged in their own struggles in a political climate largely defined by the lingering consequences of Aristide's removal from power.[33] Needless to say, with Aristide unable to return to the country, any Haitian government would have struggled to establish legitimacy in the eyes of a significant portion of the Haitian population. It was not until January 2010, however, that Haiti would again attract the attention of the world's dominant media outlets and most influential polities.

The Earthquake

On the twelfth of January, 2010, Haiti was struck with a massive earthquake and series of aftershocks which devastated the capital Port-au-Prince and the less populated surrounding areas. An earthquake of such magnitude would likely cause death and injury in any populous area unfortunate enough to be impacted, but the scale of the death and destruction witnessed in Port-au-Prince revealed the extent to which the event was a human-made as well as natural disaster. First, it is necessary to address the matter of urbanization in Port-au-Prince, a city which has been entirely unable to accommodate the number of citizens within it. This urbanization was

[31] Ibid, 234
[32] Ibid, 235
[33] Ibid, 250-316

precipitated in large part due to the decimation of Haitian agriculture as a result of trade liberalization, particularly the reduction of agricultural import tariffs following the ouster of Jean-Claude Duvalier.[34] Haiti was self-sufficient in rice, poultry, sugar, and pork production in the 1970s, only to become the largest importer of US foodstuffs in the Caribbean and the fourth largest importer of subsidized US rice in the world.[35] In a striking moment of candor following the earthquake, Bill Clinton admitted that while the trade policies advocated by successive US administrations including his own, "may have been good for some farmers in Arkansas," they have entailed horrible consequences for the Haitian people.[36] This realization has apparently not prevented Clinton from continuing to champion the same failed neoliberal development model which brought about the circumstances he now laments.

With the Haitian government's capacity to fulfill its administrative duties further reduced by the earthquake's destruction, the international community staged a military intervention which was uncritically portrayed as a purely humanitarian endeavour by most media outlets. What was less reported in the mainstream press was the shift of governmental power to the Interim Haiti Recovery Commission, a coalition composed of seventeen voting members including the United States, Brazil, Canada, France, the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, and the Inter-American Development Bank.[37] Essentially, the institution responsible for administering Haiti's recovery was composed of a greater number of international voting members than Haitian voting members.[38] The United States and its allies used this opportunity to directly "manage" Haitian politics until it was deemed appropriate for the country to be ruled by its own citizens and according to the democratic mandate of the Haitian people.

This direct control was quickly coupled with the establishment of what observers have called "a democratic façade"

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[34] Alex Dupuy, "Disaster Capitalism to the Recue: The International Community and Haiti after the Earthquake" NACLA Report on the Americas Vol. 43 No. 4 (2010): 16
[35] Ibid, 17
[36] Ibid, 14
[37] Ibid, 15
[38] Ibid

with the general election on November 28, 2010.[39] This election was marred by woefully inadequate infrastructure, accusations of widespread fraud, and a turnout of one quarter of the country's eligible voters.[40] The low turnout is largely attributable to the banning of Fanmi Lavalas, which continues to be associated with Aristide and remains the country's largest political party.[41] Consequently, the election was actually a demonstration of the *lack* of democracy in what remains an internationally dominated Haiti. However, this did not prevent the United States, CARICOM, and the OAS from celebrating and validating the results which were followed by a runoff election.[42] Michel Martelly eventually emerged victorious in the March 20, 2011 elections which saw an even lower voter turnout than was observed in November.[43] The undemocratic nature of this electoral process has been recognized by Haitian activists who have described the process as a "selection" rather than an election.[44] Regardless of the terms one prefers to use, the Haitian state has yet to remove itself from the elite domination and foreign control which has been a defining feature of its history since the original Haitian revolution two centuries ago.

Understanding the Haitian State

The preceding historical overview of Haitian political history has sought to establish an historical basis for the application of state theory to the case of Haiti. It will also allow for an examination of the strategies of the Haitian left in the context of an immensely constrained state. Above all, it has endeavoured to support the notion that the horrendous socio-economic conditions existing within Haiti are primarily attributable to the social counter-revolution dating back to the era of Toussaint L'Ouverture which has prevented the Haitian state from effectively serving the interests of the majority of the Haitian people. The forthcoming sections, however, will critique the orthodox leftist response to this condition.

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[39] Roger Annis and Kim Ives, "Haiti's Election Debacle: A Coup Legacy" NACLA Report on the Americas Vol. 44 No. 1 (2011): 23
[40] Ibid, 22-23
[41] Ibid, 23
[42] Ibid, 24
[43] Kim Ives, "Michel Martelly: Aristide's Weak Imitator," The Guardian, March 22, 2011, accessed February 23, 2012, http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/cifamerica/2011/mar/22/haiti-jean-bertrand-aristide
[44] Annis and Ives, "Haiti's Election Debacle", 23

Given that a weak and dependent Haitian state is the source of much of Haiti's troubles, it is understandable that the Haitian left and its international allies would campaign for a substantively independent Haitian state. But this prescribes precisely what history suggests Haiti cannot have.

State theorists have endeavoured to establish an abstract and critical understanding of the modern state, and the findings of this field of scholarship can assist in understanding Haiti's experiences and possible future trajectories. Within the Marxist tradition, there has been a division between instrumentalist and structuralist theories of the capitalist state, both of which posit that the capitalist state can only be understood in relation to the dynamics and distribution of social forces, particularly class forces, within society.[45] Recent developments in state theory have drawn on the contributions of these two perspectives while attempting to transcend some of the reductionist tendencies inherent in both frameworks. Bob Jessop has developed a particularly nuanced theory of state power which he calls a strategic-relational approach. This approach argues that the capacity of a state to effectively pursue a particular course of action is determined by the balance of relational political forces operating under a given state-form which privileges certain political strategies over others.[46] While delving into the details of this theoretical proposition is beyond the scope of this paper, such a perspective underscores the need to dispel any notion that, once captured, state office in and of itself can effectively precipitate radical social change. Put differently, the state is not separate from the social dynamics it supposedly presides over. As Poulantzas argued, "the state is a social relation."[47]

In the case of Haiti, this implies that so long as Haitian elites retain such disproportionate control over the country's economic resources, and so long as their influence is backed up by powerful international allies such as the United States, the Haitian

[45] Clyde W. Barrow, "The Miliband-Poulantzas Debate: An Intellectual History" in, *Paradigm Lost: State Theory Reconsidered.* eds. Stanley Aronowitz and Peter Bratsis, (Minneapolis, Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 2002)
[46] Bob Jessop, *State Theory: Putting Capitalist States in their Place,* (University Park Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1990), 149. The concept has been more recently developed in Jessop's *State Power: A Strategic-Relational Approach,* (Malden Massachusetts: Polity Press, 2008)
[47] Jessop, *State Power,* 118-119

state will be unable to effectively pursue the interests of the country's impoverished population. The structural constraints on the Haitian state can manifest themselves in various ways that have been witnessed throughout the history of Haiti and other countries of the global south. First, there is the possibility that the state will be directly controlled by elite actors themselves. Second, the state can be under a military force closely associated with upper class groups. What is more important to recognize, however, is that the state does not need to be under the *direct* control of economic elites in order to serve their interests. A genuinely leftist government may feel compelled toward moderation so as to prevent a reactionary response by domestic or international forces. Finally, if the state does take actions which challenge the essential interests of those with sufficient economic power, the *effectiveness* of this action risks being undermined by a reactionary response which can take the form of a capital strike, international economic sanctions, or a violent coup. Ultimately, given the immense inequality in social power within Haiti, compounded by the demonstrated willingness of the United States and its allies to intervene in the interests of international and Haitian capital, the state is not likely to be an effective channel for significant social change.

Implications for the Haitian Left

Recognition of the structural constraints on the Haitian state can lead to an understandable degree of pessimism. Recognizing the constraints placed on the Haitian state, and writing *before* the devastating earthquake of 2010, Alex Dupuy concedes that "the best that the popular democratic movement can hope for during the next five years would be to create the conditions for a stable and functioning minimalist democracy. Such an accomplishment could in turn allow for the continued struggle to enlarge the democratic space so that the people can become self-actualizing agents and democracy will cease to be the privileged domain of the wealthy and powerful few."[48] While Dupuy's skepticism regarding the prospects for progressive change is warranted, such an approach entails two problems. First, if the social constraints influencing the state are considered, even if Haiti were to become a more stable procedural democracy, this would not ensure that the state could act in accordance with democratic demands. Secondly, there is nothing to suggest that the Haitian population will

[48] Dupuy, *The Prophet and the Power*, 22

limit its demands to minimalist democratic procedures, as they are understandably more concerned with remedying the horrendous material conditions that so many citizens are forced to endure.

Instead, what is needed is the pursuit of social change outside of the state. This entails an erosion of elite dominance in Haiti through social action which directly confronts economic arrangements which perpetuate inequality. The actions of land reform groups in Brazil and South Africa provide an example of such political activity.[49] Of course, such strategies entail their own challenges and also risk precipitating a reactionary response. They are distinct from state-centric political strategies, however, insofar as they seek to directly influence the social conditions of society, as opposed to attempting to influence the state which is a *reflection* of these conditions. Given the role played by international actors it also seems necessary for the Haitian left to continue efforts to internationalize their approach by appealing to others in the global south as well as those within the core industrialized states. Ultimately, the biggest obstacle to the implementation of pro-poor governance in Haiti is the state's ineffectiveness as a force for change combined with its demonstrated effectiveness in reinforcing status-quo power structures. This can serve to explain why the Haitian state has been such an important contributor to the subjugation of the Haitian people, but has repeatedly failed to aid their political emancipation.

Conclusion

Since the declaration of the Haitian Republic following the country's revolution, the Haitian people have struggled to establish a substantively independent state which serves the interests of the majority of its citizenry. Throughout the twentieth century the United States continually exerted its influence over the country to the detriment of most Haitian citizens. This process has continued

[49] There are numerous books addressing these cases, two recent titles are; Gabriel Ondetti, *Land, Protest, and Politics: The Landless Movement and the Struggle for Agrarian Reform in Brazil,* (University Park, Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2008). Elke Zuern, *The Politics of Necessity: Community Organizing and Democracy in South Africa,* (Madison, Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 2011). Such strategies are undoubtedly being pursued in Haiti on a smaller scale, and this paper argues that they are likely to be more efficacious than those grounded in the pursuit of state office.

following the major earthquake of January 2010. That the United States has knowingly pursued policies to the detriment of the Haitian people should not be controversial, as prominent US government figures occasionally admit it themselves.[50] While it is true that the Haitian state's lack of autonomous capacity and continual subjection to elite control has been a significant contributor to the country's ills, this does not validate a political strategy grounded in the pursuit of state office on the part of those seeking progressive change. It is up to the Haitian left to develop a strategy which avoids and transcends the pursuit of state power. Such a task faces its own significant obstacles but is as necessary as it is unenviable if the ambitions of the Haitian revolution and the generations which followed are to be realized.

[50] Recall the aforementioned quotes from Dean Rusk and Bill Clinton.

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