Haiti’s Nightmare and the Lessons of History

BY MICHEL-ROLPH TROUILLOT

“The Haitian mind, you know, is just different,” says Robert McCandless, a Washington lobbyist described as “the most vociferous advocate” of the civilians and military leaders behind the coup that toppled President Jean-Bertrand Aristide. “I mean they don’t understand why we react to things that they don’t, and why we don’t react to things that they do.” Aristide’s own prime minister, Robert Malval, seems to agree, at least in part. Referring to McCandless’ employers, he warned U.S. reporters: “we are not talking about rational people.”

These statements rest on weak evidence. The Haitian high brass has been quite “rational” in pursuing its interests since 1985. More disturbingly however, statements such as these lead us to search for the wrong kind of explanation. They reflect the tendency to resort to exceptionalism. Haitian exceptionalism takes many forms. The most dangerous and resilient is the idea that the Haitian political quagmire is due to some congenital disease of the Haitian mind. Such a conclusion makes Haiti’s political dilemma immune to rational explanation and therefore to solutions that could be both just and practical.

As soothing—and rewarding—as such analyses may be to their proponents in Port-au-Prince and Washington, if history reveals anything it is the very extent to which the stakes have long been different for various groups in Haiti. The history of Haiti is one of sharply opposed interests, of competing visions of state and nation. If “the Haitian mind” is a short-cut phrase to signify the political will of the majority, Haitians can be said to have been of one mind only twice in their history. Their first—and only unquestionable—gesture as a people was in 1791-1804, when they stood en masse against slavery and French colonialism. Their second national gesture was in 1990, when a 67% majority elected Father Aristide to the presidency in the country’s first free elections. The very aftermath of that election, however, suggests the depth of the divisions that had ripened between the two events.

Even sympathetic U.S. policymakers find Haiti hard to explain, mainly for two related reasons. First, for most of them, as for many other Americans, history is rarely a serious explanation—especially history that runs deep. Analyses that go back a decade, let alone a
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The product of a revolution against slavery and colonialism, Haiti emerged in 1804 from the ashes of the French colony of Saint-Domingue on the western part of the Caribbean island of Hispaniola. By 1789, Saint-Domingue was arguably the most profitable colony of the Western world, with world production records for both sugar and coffee. It was also the worst place in the world to be black. The colony imported many more enslaved Africans than most plantation societies of the Americas, including the United States. It also killed them at a much faster pace through mistreatment and harsh labor. In August, 1791, the slaves of Saint-Domingue revolted. Under the successive leadership of Toussaint Louverture and Jean-Jacques Dessalines, they defeated Napoleon’s army after 12 years of struggle. In this way, the first independent state of the Americas—where “Freedom” meant freedom for everyone—was born.

The Haitian victory exemplified the best of the age of revolutions. Like the French revolution, it was a revolution for social justice. Like the U.S. revolution, it was a victory against colonialism. It foreshadowed the independence of Latin America and the demise of African-American slavery. But it was ill-timed precisely for these reasons. In 1791, European powers held Caribbean colonies and accepted African slavery as a matter of fact. Similarly, representatives of the southern states in the U.S. Congress argued vehemently that recognition of Haitian independence would encourage blacks elsewhere to revolt. Thus France, England, the Netherlands and the United States traded with Haiti, but only on terms that they themselves imposed. The United States provided most of Haiti’s imports but bought little in return. It only recognized Haitian independence almost 60 years after the fact, in 1862, when the Civil War created an unexpected need for cotton and silenced the South in Washington. While Haiti was ostracized diplomatically, it also represented “the world’s first experiment in neo-colonialism.” If in retrospect the Haitian revolution appears to have been a failure, it is in part because Western powers—notably France, England, the United States and the Vatican—wanted it to fail. But it is also because the new Haitian elites treated the rural masses pretty much the same way that the West had treated them.

Haitian leaders vainly tried to restore the plantation economy immediately after independence. The majority of the former slaves, however, abhorred plantation labor and settled as small peasants on land bought or reconquered from the state or abandoned by large landowners. The urban elites countered with a dual strategy, set up during the presidencies of Alexandre Pétion (1807-1818) and Jean-Pierre Boyer (1818-1843).

The first leg of that strategy was economic. The elites turned the fiscal and marketing systems of the country into mechanisms that would allow them to siphon the wealth produced by the peasants. As traders, politicians and state employees, they lived off the peasants’ labor. An import-export bourgeoisie, dominated by foreign nationals and unconcerned with local production, garnered profits from the labor of the peasantry. Taxes collected in the urban markets and at the customhouses—and ultimately paid by the peasants—provided the bulk of government revenues. In 1842, more than 90% of government revenues were collected at the customhouses. In 1891, import and export duties accounted for 98.2% of state income.

Coffee, Haiti’s main agricultural export, was the favorite target of these elites and the centerpiece of Haiti’s fiscal policy. The direct and hidden taxes imposed on that peasant crop accounted for from 60 to 90% of government revenues from the late 1800s to the first half of this century. Up until recently, the various charges on coffee amounted to a 40% tax on peasant income in a country where, after almost 200 years of independence, the government has yet to collect income tax from most merchants, civil servants, or middle-class employees.

Successive Haitian governments also heavily taxed food and other necessaries such as flour, oil, candles, kerosene and matches. Meanwhile, luxuries consumed by the elites entered the country free of charge. At the
turn of the century, for example, import duties on a pair of opera glasses were equal to those on five gallons of kerosene. Eighty years later, as coffee exports fell during Jean-Claude Duvalier’s regime, taxes on flour, sugar, petroleum, tobacco and matches provided as much as 25% of government revenues. Meanwhile, the number of luxury cars in the streets of Port-au-Prince reached an all-time high.

The economic response of the Haitian elites to the emergence of an independent peasantry refusing to labor on the plantations guaranteed that they would get their surplus willy nilly, even if that meant squeezing the nation to death. The state reproduced itself by sucking up the peasantry; the urban classes reproduced themselves by sucking up the state and the peasantry. For a century and a half, successive governments have prolonged the agony.

Death and ruin were foretold in these choices. So was political instability. To limit the political turbulence that was an inevitable outcome of their economic designs, the Haitian elites added a second leg to their strategy. They used the very isolation that the peasantry enjoyed on its small mountain plots to keep it away from the political scene. While the state turned inward to consolidate its control, the urban elites gravitating around that state pushed the rural majority toward the margins of political society. The very peasants who subsidized the state had no say in the running of the state. Once in a while, they joined one or another regional landowner to attack Port-au-Prince, the ultimate site of power. Most often, they were kept at bay legally and illegally, through manipulation of election laws or through repression. It’s doubtful that any elected official in Haiti ever received a thousand legitimate votes before the twentieth century. Before the Duvalier dictatorship, many peasants would not have been able to name the president. They encountered the state mainly through two dubious characters: the presepté who collected their market taxes and the chéf seksyon (section chief) who acted as the sole representative of the three branches of government in the deep countryside. That countryside was—and remains—a class colony of the urban elites. To wit, as befits occupied territories, the infamous chéf seksyon is a member of the army.

The Haitian Creole language registers the enormous distance between the elites and the peasantry. The word leta in Creole means both “the state” and “a bully.” Urbanites, in turn, often refer to rural dwellers as “moun andewò” (outsiders). Few have bothered to ask how or why rural people can be “moun andewò” in a country that is 70% rural.

Haitian culture also registers the distance, although in complex ways. To take only the example of language, all Haitians speak Haitian Creole, which evolved during the Haitian colonial period and matured in the nineteenth century. Less than 8% of the population is comfortable speaking French, a competence they acquire mainly through the school system. Only a tiny minority within the elites can be said to be truly bilingual in both French and Haitian Creole. Similarly, practices and beliefs associated with Haitian folk religion—referred to as “vodoun” mainly by non-practitioners—can easily be found among the elites, in spite of their formal adherence to Christianity. At the same time, most peasants see themselves as Roman Catholic Christians, practice Roman Catholicism as much as possible (that is, to the extent that priests and churches are accessible), and follow the annual cycle of Roman Catholic events. If prompted and willing, they may add, however, that they are also “servants of the gods.”

Thus, while it would be wrong to suggest that elites and masses fully share the same culture, it is equally misleading to divide Haiti into two cultural spheres. The fundamental cultural divide is not based on huge differences in cultural repertoire but on the use of those differences that exist to create a social wall that few can cross. Culture works as a divider because of the value added to the rather small part of that repertoire that is not accessible to the majority. More important than bilingualism per se are the number of times an elite child is told not to speak Creole. More important than the elites’ uneven competence in
French are the number of times that privileged Haitians make a point of using French, and the fact that the use of French in the school and court systems denies majority participation. More important than the elites' mixed adherence to Christianity are the number of times privileged Haitians publicly associate "vodoun" with evil, and the number of times successive governments persecuted the servants of the gods, often with zealous help from the Catholic Church.

Two structural features emerge from this sociohistorical sketch: the total rejection of the majority by the very groups that exert political and economic control, and the role of the state as the key mechanism of both rejection and control. Simply put, the Haitian elites made a choice early on that the maintenance of their lifestyle was more important than the survival of the majority. That choice, in turn, meant using the state both to suck up the economic output of the majority and to stop the majority from crying out too loudly. Seen from that perspective, the Haitian state has never represented governance for the people, let alone by the people. It is inherently predatory: it has always operated against the nation it claims to represent. It is a closed world over which civil society has no hold. The 1915-1934 U.S. occupation of Haiti left the country with two poisoned gifts: a weaker civil society and a solidified state apparatus.

The first outcome was largely unintentional, the second deliberate. The U.S. Marine occupiers professed a desire to create a U.S.-style middle class. They failed in that attempt—in part because the goal was set too late and too timidly, and in part because the occupation did little to change Haiti's economic structure. Haiti's trade dependence on coffee increased during the occupation. So did its fiscal dependence on custom revenues. Export duties in fact increased in relation to the value of merchandise, imposing an even greater burden on the average consumer. The occupiers did train a few craftsmen, enlarging Haiti's small crew of urban independent producers. More important, the Marines improved the material infrastructure of the country, most notably by overseeing the construction of roads. The political cost was heavy: peasants, at times bound in ropes, provided forced labor for these projects. The economic returns were meager. The minor improvements did not lessen the elites' historical aversion to production. They were used to "making money" as merchants or as state officials. Why would a few roads make them risk the hassles of manufacturing or petty-commodity production? They considered making things a lower-class venture. Rich people, they believed, made profit only by buying and selling, usually with the connivance of the state.

The occupation failed to strengthen civil society, but it did strengthen the arm of the state. First, the Marines reinforced the fiscal and economic power of the capital city, Port-au-Prince, notably by centralizing the customhouses. Second and more damaging, the occupation deliberately contributed to the centralization of political power in Port-au-Prince. It did so by "pacifying" the countryside—by "modernizing" the so-called rural police (the infamous chef seksyon), and by creating a new Haitian army, the very one now at the center of the crisis. Whereas the first Haitian army, because it was born of the war against the French, could claim a patriotic mission, the Haitian Garde was created specifically to fight Haitians. Up to now, indeed, this force has never fought anyone but Haitians. Finally, by contrast to the first Haitian army whose allegiances were primarily regional, the army created by the Marines was heavily centralized.

It became easier for would-be dictators to control the state. However brutal they were, Haitian dictators of the nineteenth century knew that they might have to pay for power with their lives. However crude the system of checks and balances, it limited the ambitions of the generals. Military centralization afforded full protection to the rulers of the day and removed the tenuous right of the majority to revolt. Hereafter, as Hans Schmidt notes, "political strongmen in Port-au-Prince were able to control the entire country more effectively than ever before."
Thus, the cadets of the Military School set up by the Marines took part in the removal of President Elie Lescot (1941-1946), and in the nomination and removal of his successor, Dumarsais Estimé (1946-1950), before ultimately placing one of their own, Paul Magloire (1950-1956), in the presidency. By the time Magloire left, the army had become the final arbiter of Haitian politics and its dominant factions imposed the presidency of François “Papa Doc” Duvalier. Duvalier learned the lesson: he gradually discharged most senior officers, but he relied heavily on their successors to build the most centralized power Haiti had ever seen. Then, he closed the Military School.

François Duvalier was a cunning and ruthless politician, who enjoyed the fruits of Washington’s “realistic” policies at the very moment his regime seemed to run out of steam. Yet neither his ruthlessness nor U.S. support fully explains the longevity of François Duvalier’s dictatorship, the fact his son Jean-Claude lasted even longer, nor that Duvalierism is now going through a revival of a sort, seven years after Jean-Claude Duvalier went into exile. To be sure, the first Duvalier regime exercised state repression with a swiftness hitherto unknown in Haiti. To be sure, in 1963 U.S. army doctors reportedly revived a comatose Papa Doc, lengthening by decades the agony of average Haitians. To be sure, in 1971 U.S. Ambassador Clinton Knox personally supervised the transition from one Duvalier to another. To be sure, current wavering in Washington has provided much needed fuel to the Duvalierist machine. None of these facts should, however, mask the fact that Duvalierism has its roots in the very socioeconomic organization set up by the Haitian elites and in the centralization of the state and army brought about by the Marines. Using the full power of the centralized state, the elder Duvalier formalized a system of absolute individual power. At the center of the system stood an all-powerful and personalized executive branch that dominated all the activities of the state, from military training to the writing of national school exams. That modified state apparatus, in turn, attacked or marginalized all the groupings and institutions of an already weak civil society: extended families, schools, neighborhoods, clergy, press, villages, trade unions, soccer teams and carnival bands. At one point, François Duvalier even outlawed the boy scouts. In sheer Mussolinian fashion, the Duvalierist state aimed to become “total”; its means became totalitarian.

But Duvalier could achieve his aim only because of the role played by the state in Haitian history since independence. Indeed, Duvalierism invented very few formulas of power. Rather, it systematically codified old-fashioned practices of the Haitian state. Government-sponsored paramilitary groups, such as the “Zenglen,” had terrorized Haitians a century before the Duvaliers. The difference in the Duvalier era was that the Volontaires de la Sécurité Nationale (VSN) enjoyed total and official support from an all-powerful Executive. That systematic backing turned them into the most feared militia of Haitian history. The methods of the dreaded Tontons Macoute—the secret police, whose members and function overlap with those of the militia—reflect the systematization of practices honed by the death squads of earlier years.

Similarly, the Duvalierists systematized the extractive power of the state, multiplying the number of points at which the government could suck up money from the average citizen. Duties and charges multiplied, varying in form from additional stamps on official papers, transcripts or documents, to booths set up for no other purpose than the enrichment of a local strongman. More important, the government centralized the management of coffee exports and increased taxes in the process, creating new fortunes. The Executive and its proxies also took control of the import and distribution of a number of basic commodities, such as oil, flour, matches and tobacco. The Duvalierists also declared open season on the Treasury. Not only did they—like their predecessors—misuse public
funds, but they made their personal fortune the very raison d'être of state revenues. An infamous operation suggests Duvalierism's extremes: while previous Haitian governments always fed—at least metaphorically—on Haitian sweat and blood, in the 1960s the Duvaliers and their cronies literally sold Haitian blood to the U.S. market.

In systematizing both the extractive and repressive power of the state, Duvalierism gravely worsened the Haitian situation. Predatory policies accelerated the speed of environmental degradation. Impoverished peasants rushed in greater numbers to urban centers, especially the shantytowns of Port-au-Prince. Following U.S. advice to bypass the peasantry, Jean-Claude Duvalier's regime tried to take advantage of this urban labor force to spark an "economic revolution." The rapid spread of light-assembly industries, subcontracted to U.S. firms, only reinforced polarization. As imports rose in both quantity and value, so too did the already huge gap between the haves and the have-nots. The intense economic polarization and the unmediated distance between the regime and the swollen urban masses contributed to urban uprars in the mid-1980s. In the midst of that popular agitation, Jean-Claude Duvalier was forced into exile in February, 1986, leaving behind a much more depleted country and much more desperate elites.

Regardless of the deals that led to Jean-Claude Duvalier's departure, the end of that dictatorship was an obvious victory for the Haitian people. But it did not and could not mean the end of Haiti's nightmare. Haiti begot two Duvaliers. It could beget more or worse if the structures that bred Duvalierism remain unchanged. The elimination of known Duvalierists or officers is no guarantee whatsoever that Duvalierist-type behavior within the state apparatus will not immediately resurge.

The conversion to a non-Duvalierist regime is only one of the transitions that Haiti now faces. A second transition is the passage to the rule of law. The two somewhat overlap, while in other ways, they cancel each other out. Attempts to get rid of Duvalierism by legal means have failed: the 1987 Constitution—which banished prominent Duvalierists from the political process—is a dead letter; the 1987 elections resulted in a massacre; the presidency of Aristide ended with a coup.

If Duvalierism impedes the advent of the rule of law, the weakness of democratic institutions, in turn, keeps Duvalierism alive. Right-wing allegations to the contrary, Aristide's presidency showed the lowest level of human rights violations by the state in recent Haitian history. At the same time, the perception—never proven, though sincere—that President Aristide might not even try to control Port-au-Prince's masses if that human flood decided to take the law in its hands helped the coup leaders. Individuals who were not Duvalierists—some of whom had voted for Aristide—honestly believed that their lives were in danger. That they are now in more immediate danger only exemplifies the paradoxical overlap of the two transitions.

This overlap stems from the transformations that Duvalierism imposed upon Haitian society. The elder Duvalier achieved the near destruction of Haitian civil society. Civilities that had bonded otherwise divided citizens tumbled under the weight of a totalitarian apparatus which made political polarization a fact of daily life. The younger Duvalier's reckless wager on light industry added the weight of a huge, desperately poor urban underclass to this breakdown of social norms. Port-au-Prince and its immediate environs now counts anywhere between 1.2 and 1.8 million people split between two extremes: an increasingly nervous minority, desperate to hold on to its privileges, and an anonymous mass that has nothing left to lose and that occupies front stage by sheer virtue of its size. The temptation to use this "lumpen" for political leverage is almost irresistible. But as the Duvalierists demonstrated—staging a made-for-T.V. protest against the landing of the USS Harlan County that forced a U.S. president to back down—this lumpen can cut many ways.

Duvalierism's legacy of extremes means that neither changes in the state apparatus nor institutional reform are enough to compel real change in Haiti. Relations between the state and civil society have deteriorated to the point that any government, regardless of its popularity, can maintain itself only by force of arms, at least until the state gains some legitimacy. The Haitian problem is not merely political. It is in the class structure of the country, in the military organization of a society at war with itself, in a fiscal system that discourages production and investment, and finally, in sociocultural elitism.

Legitimacy of the state, in turn, requires a social contract—that is, the participation of Haiti's majority in deciding the fate of the country. It requires the recognition by the urban elites and their foreign partners that Haiti remains fundamentally a country of poor peasants. But old habits die hard. The negotiations concerning Aristide's return all but forgot the fact that Aristide himself was possible in part because of deep political changes in the countryside, rooted in the rural churches and the emerging peasant movement. To emphasize the peasantry as the most repressed actor on the Haitian political stage is not to fall into romanticism. It is, on the contrary, to acknowledge that Haitian democracy will happen in the deep hinterland or it will not exist at all.

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4. The most frequent warning to the U.S. Congress by Haiti specialists or policymakers—especially supporters of the authoritarian status quo—is that just policies may not be “realistic.” Unfortunately, U.S. lawmakers have too often failed to ask why and how less equitable solutions would prove more effective. See U.S. House of Representatives, Committee on Foreign Affairs, Human Rights in Haiti, Hearing before the Subcommittee on Human Rights, (1985); U.S. House of Representatives, Committee on Foreign Affairs, The Political Crisis in Haiti, Hearings before the Subcommittee on Western Hemispheric Affairs, (1988); U.S. House of Representatives, Committee on Foreign Affairs, The Situation in Haiti and U.S. Policy, Hearing before the subcommittees on Human Rights and International Organizations. (1992).
8. Historians regard the legislative elections of 1870 in Port-au-Prince as one of the few legitimate electoral victories of nineteenth-century Haiti. Yet in 1870, less than a thousand Port-au-Prince residents had the right to vote.
11. Haiti remains, of course, a “weak state” in academic parlance.
12. Trouillot, Haiti: State Against Nation, p. 103.

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