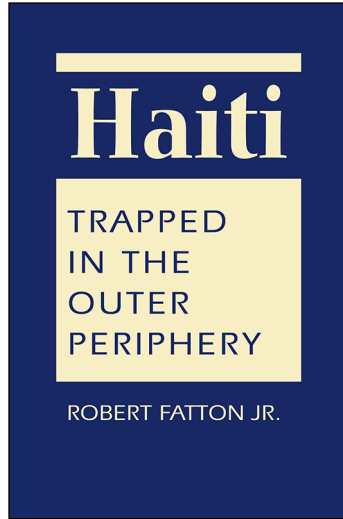


EXCERPTED FROM

Haiti:
Trapped in the
Outer Periphery

Robert Fatton Jr.

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1

Haiti's Predicament

HAD IT NOT BEEN FOR THE HORRORS OF THE CATAclysmic earthquake of January 12, 2010, that killed more than 220,000 Haitians and destroyed much of the country, this book would never have been written. I have published two books on Haiti in the past ten years, and had decided to remain silent because I had nothing new to add to the literature. The earthquake with its ghastly dust of death and destruction compelled me to reassess that decision. This book has therefore been conceived in deep anguish and at times utter despair; it is full of anger, disappointments, but also faint hopes. It is about Haiti in a time of catastrophe and in the age of globalization. It rages against the inequalities generated by the existing imperial world order, which for more than thirty years has inflicted the “scourge of neo-liberalism”¹ on the poorest societies of the planet. It laments the failures of popular movements such as Lavalas² to transform the internal structures of society once they had achieved power. Many of these movements degenerated into opportunistic forms of presidential messianism under the combined weight of internecine conflicts, ruling class opposition, and imperial intrusions. It is a book infused with a deep pessimism of the intellect and a fragile optimism of the will.

The neoliberal scourge has created a new zone of catastrophe in the world system: a zone of generalized inequities and ultracheap wages whose politics offers a simulacrum of electoral “democracy” under the tutelage of a self-appointed international community. This zone is often besieged by wars, natural disasters, regime change, and foreign occupation. It is composed of states like Sierra Leone, Guinea,

Democratic Republic of Congo, Somalia, East Timor, Afghanistan, and Haiti. These are the states that conventional wisdom defines as fragile or failed states.³ I prefer to call them instead the states of the “outer periphery.”

I have coined this label because failed-state theorists tend to argue that failed states are the product of their own traditional culture, which resists in dysfunctional ways the liberalizing, progressive, and rational impact of globalization. These theorists contend that failed societies can be fixed only if they abandon their “backward-looking” norms and embrace “modernity” and its triad, the rule of law, liberal democracy, and entrepreneurial behavior. In turn, this transformation is impossible without the full cultural, economic, and often military intervention of a Western-led international community. Stephen Krasner, former director of the Policy Planning Staff at the US Department of State under the George W. Bush administration and professor of political science at Stanford University, puts it bluntly:

Left to their own devices, collapsed and badly governed states will not fix themselves because they have limited administrative capacity, not least with regard to maintaining internal security. Occupying powers cannot escape choices about what new governance structures will be created and sustained. To reduce international threats and improve the prospects for individuals in such polities, alternative institutional arrangements supported by external actors, such as de facto trusteeships and shared sovereignty, should be added to the list of policy options . . . [M]ajor states or regional or international organizations could assume some form of de facto trusteeship or protectorate responsibility for specific countries, even if there is no general international convention defining such arrangements. In a trusteeship, international actors would assume control over local functions for an indefinite period of time. They might also eliminate the international legal sovereignty of the entity or control treaty-making powers in whole or in part (e.g., in specific areas such as security or trade). There would be no assumption of a withdrawal in the short or medium term.⁴

A new version of the white man’s burden is thus in vogue, calling for the imposition of de facto trusteeships on all failed states; it is infused with militaristic impulses hidden by humanitarian and cosmopolitan gestures.⁵ Thus, failed-state theorists advocate the further integration of countries like Haiti into the existing world system as a means of extricating them from their predicament. I argue that this proposition is deeply flawed.

The point is not refusing to participate in world economic and cultural exchanges as a matter of principle, but rather to reject both the current hierarchical mode of participation and the exploitative nature of that world economy. The further integration of outer peripheral states into the existing system, and under present relations of power, can only exacerbate their desperate conditions instead of improve them. In fact, it is the interaction between privileged domestic classes and imperial forces that confines a country like Haiti to the outer periphery—the devastated wasteland of the global capitalist system. The paradox of the outer periphery is that it has been fully integrated into the circuits of the capitalist world economy, but the mode of integration has forced this wasteland into subordinate forms of production requiring limited capital investments and export-oriented enclaves of unpaid or ultracheap labor. In Haiti, this pattern has remained unchanged since the colonial days of slavery and the sugar plantations.

What differs now, however, is the scourge of neoliberalism, which has deepened local and global inequalities and contributed to the disintegration of already weak states. The financial apparatuses of neoliberalism, particularly the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, have inflicted waves of economic deregulation and privatization on poor, dependent nations to the point that states cannot perform vital functions and are increasingly supplanted by non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Bypassed by foreign aid, which privileged funding to NGOs, such states have become empty shells incapable of providing minimal services to their citizenry. The decomposition of the state has generated political decay, increased levels of insecurity and narco-trafficking, not to mention the complete erosion of the sense of civic obligation. In fact, societies in the outer periphery exhibit symptoms of decadence, pervasive corruption, and depravity. With the complicity of imperial forces, rulers seek to use electoral circuses to hide these symptoms of venality and disintegration.

The reign of neoliberalism has introduced into the outer periphery a simulacrum of democracy; rigged elections sanctioned as free and fair by the international community's machinery of legitimation occur regularly and parachute improbable rulers into power. So for instance, the international monitors decreed that the first round of the Haitian presidential elections of 2010 was "salvageable" even though it effectively stopped after barely five hours of voting and had been

rejected as fraudulent by virtually all the candidates. This electoral fiasco, whose original results were reversed after months of negotiations and imperial threats, led to the victory of Michel Martelly, a popular entertainer and singer known as “Sweet Micky” for his burlesque Kompa performances or “Têt-Kalé” for his bald head. With no previous political experience and no effective party affiliation, Martelly defined himself as the paradigmatic “antisystem” candidate who would change Haiti by challenging a corrupt political class.

Haitians initially perceived Martelly’s candidacy as a *blague* (hoax), but the generalized incompetence and powerlessness of the political class in dealing with the cataclysmic destruction brought about by the earthquake created a space for his ascendancy. In short, popular disenchantment with the political figures that had been in and out of power since the fall of the Jean-Claude Duvalier dictatorship in 1986 created a vacuum that Martelly cleverly filled. Moreover, the absence of Lavalas, the party of former president Jean-Bertrand Aristide, which had been banned from the elections, facilitated Martelly’s rise. The minority of Haitians who bothered to vote overwhelmingly elected Martelly in 2010. This long election that ended almost half a year after it began marked a period of magical realism in Haitian politics. It was an election that should have never taken place. After such a devastating earthquake, the election should have been postponed and a government of national unity created. It was clear that Haiti had neither the organizational means nor the political energy to go to the polls; the country was exhausted, destroyed, and under foreign occupation. It was also a time of cholera, which United Nations (UN) troops introduced into the country.⁶ And yet, imperial forces demanded and got an election, which was, to use the French word, *incroyable*, in the sense that it happened; it was no hallucination, even though it should have been. Martelly became president of Haiti on May 14, 2011, six months after the debacle of a discredited first electoral round. In spite of this electoral fiasco, the international community was satisfied with the result. So much so that, in June 2013, it kept the fiction going when US vice president Joseph Biden “commended Haiti on the successful and peaceful election that brought President Martelly to power.”⁷

Haiti’s deep political, economic, and social crises reflected the interests and choices made by powerful domestic and international actors. But these crises were also born of the fury of uncontrollable natural disasters. Prior to the 2010 earthquake, the country had been

devastated by four major hurricanes (Faye, Gustave, Hanna, and Ike) that maimed, killed, and ravaged people and harvests in 2008. And in October 2012, a new storm, Sandy, inflicted yet another blow to a barely recovering nation. It is true that had Haiti enjoyed a modicum of good governance, these natural calamities would not have had such a destructive impact. On the other hand, this relentless pummeling by the gods of nature has undermined what reconstruction efforts are under way and deepened Haiti's agony.

This quagmire has reinforced common stereotypes; Haiti is continuously described as the "poorest nation of the Western Hemisphere."⁸ Its citizens are seen as lacking the discipline to work, its rulers are deemed venal and corrupt, and its culture is perceived as incomprehensible and weird. Haiti is simply the paradigmatic "Other." In fact, Samuel Huntington calls Haiti a "lone country" that "lacks cultural commonality with other societies." He says that "Haiti's Creole language, Voodoo religion, revolutionary slave origins, and brutal history combine to make it a lone country. . . . Haiti, 'the neighbor nobody wants,' is truly a kinless country."⁹ This tale of Haitian exceptionalism explains nothing; it assumes that Haitians are so unique—or bizarre—that their history is incomprehensible and their predicament is beyond any solution. It is as if Haitian poverty were inexplicable, voodoo unfathomable, and the slave-led revolution unconceivable. In such a view, Haiti remains an impenetrable enigma.

Haiti has its own unique history. But Haiti is also like any other nation; it confronts similar problems and shares common experiences. While understanding the causes of poverty, corruption, religion, revolution, and violence is difficult, these phenomena are not exceptional. They are as explicable in Haiti as in any other place on the earth. To claim Haitian exceptionalism when it comes to intelligibility is to claim unintelligibility tout court.

In fact, concepts like power, class, state, empire, gender, nation, and race provide powerful heuristic tools to understand the Haitian reality. In Haiti, unproductive capitalism has transformed proximity to state power into the prime site for acquiring wealth for those not born into the elite class, which owes its economic power to comprador business practices. However weak, the state still controls the apparatus of taxation, the dispensing of licenses, and the means of coercion with which to obtain and monopolize prebendary gains.¹⁰ Moreover, the emasculation of the state brought about by neoliberal-

ism and the accompanying rise of the “NGO republic” have battered Haitian sovereignty to such a point that the symbolic razing of the heavily damaged National Palace was left in the hands of the J/P Haitian Relief Organization run by US actor Sean Penn.¹¹

Confined to the outer periphery, Haiti has little room for maneuver; it is totally dependent on foreign assistance and the remittances of its diaspora. Without this external support, the country would have a hard time staying afloat. Stuck in a society with indecent levels of inequalities and poverty, it is not surprising that Haitians seek to take what they can get from any source of assistance. For the overwhelming majority of Haitians, life is a *sauve qui peut*, a daily struggle for subsistence. This environment of generalized scarcity invites opportunistic strategies of survival, thoroughly unprincipled forms of patronage, and criminal *combinaisons*. It nurtures from top to bottom a permanent and pervasive search for easy money, which has in turn generated networks of banditry uniting members of the lower, middle, and upper classes with politicians and security officers at the highest level.

The so-called Brandt affair exploded on October 22, 2012, when Clifford Brandt, a member of one of Haiti’s richest light-skinned families, was arrested for masterminding a kidnapping ring. The ring exposed the multiclass nature of Haitian criminality.¹² It reflected the reality that, in their effort to retain or strengthen their positions of wealth and power, some members of the *grande bourgeoisie*, the government, and the security apparatus have created a Haitian mafia by enlisting the support of petty bank clerks, public functionaries, and gangs from the urban lumpen proletariat. Bourgeois bandits target and kidnap their own for ransom and use subaltern groups as well as the police itself to accomplish their crimes. Criminality has become another means of consolidating fortunes, sustaining class status, and moving out of slums. This relatively new criminal phenomenon marks the disintegration of old symbolic norms of public deference that enforced class hierarchies. The bourgeoisie can no longer hide behind a wall of deference. It is exposed, and fearful not only of the masses but also of its own demons. In fact, criminality has acquired dimensions that threaten the very survival of the state; President Martelly has claimed that the Brandt affair has uncovered a cartel of powerful gangsters that could easily overthrow his own government.¹³

Haitian society is thus undergoing a Hobbesian transformation, whereby a narrowly selfish individualism in the pursuit of easy

money is in the process of gangsterizing society and obliterating any pretense of solidarity. As Lyonel Trouillot puts it, "Banditry has spread through society as the weapon of a monstrous and dissocialized individualism. And it is the Haitian bourgeoisie, which is Haitian only in terms of the origins of its profits, which has greatly contributed to this *dissocialization*."¹⁴ While the bourgeoisie is a paradigmatic comprador class functioning as a middleman between capitalist centers of production and the domestic market, it is not the only guilty actor in the Haitian drama. Imperial forces are also culpable since they have always defended the status quo. They have contained and suffocated the radical demands of popular movements that were themselves poorly organized and crippled by their own internecine squabbles and messianic complexes. In fact, Haiti's pervasive scarcity has pushed those not born into privilege into using politics as a means of social advancement and illicit gains. The electoral process has facilitated the ascendancy of a political class seeking to use its access to state resources to escape its increasingly impoverished middle-class origins. Prebendary behavior has thus infected the body politic and sapped the ideal of the public good.

What can be done? While I have little to offer in terms of remedy for Haiti's failures, it is clear that the postearthquake strategies of reconstruction should be reversed because they differ little from past development efforts and will lead to the same impasse. In fact, they carry on the export-oriented policies of the late 1970s and they continue to bypass the state. These strategies will merely create more dependence, food insecurity, and inequalities. In addition, they are likely to accentuate rural migrations to urban areas, which will not provide the employment and wages required to avoid the further expansion of slums. Haiti, as it were, is on its way "back to the future."

This perspective, however, is rejected as unrealistic and misguided by the key foreign powers and financial institutions funding Haiti's neoliberal developmental project. Mats Lundahl, a leading scholar on the political economy of the country, offers a forceful defense of the neoliberal mode of industrialization advocated by these powers. He contends that Haiti has to submit to the discipline of world market prices and take advantage of its cheap labor to engage in production for export, which at this time implies the apparel industry. Lundahl views this strategy as the only viable option.¹⁵ He rejects as "utopian" any plan that would privilege the development of agriculture and food sovereignty.¹⁶ As he explains,

Making agricultural production for the domestic market behind protective tariff walls the first economic priority, will not only lead to inefficient high-cost production at the expense of consumers but also to political rent creation and revenue seeking. The tariff revenue obtained will quite probably be extracted by corrupt future governments and their cronies. Institutions will become, more, not less, extractive, and so will, presumably, the political institutions of Haiti.¹⁷

According to Lundahl, prioritizing agriculture leads not only to poor economic outcomes; it is also impractical given the extreme soil erosion, high man-land ratio, and lack of an effective titling system. He approvingly quotes Uli Locher, who bluntly asserts in his study of land distribution, tenure, and erosion that “rural Haiti as we know it is doomed.”¹⁸ In addition, Lundahl contends that feeding Haitians through Haitian agriculture is not feasible: “Increasing food production simply contributes to soil destruction, to ‘mining’ the soil. . . . An increasing agricultural population means more food crops at the expense of perennial tree crops which bind the soil on the mountain-sides. For the process to be reversed, the man-land ratio must decrease, not increase.”¹⁹ Not surprisingly, Lundahl argues that reducing the rural population can be achieved only by creating employment “elsewhere, in the context of an open economy, and then there is only one viable alternative: the manufacturing sector, apparel production, where Haiti has a comparative advantage in terms of wages and privileged access to the American market.”²⁰

The problem with Lundahl’s argument is that the neoliberal strategy he espouses was adopted by the Jean-Claude Duvalier dictatorship in the mid-1970s and early 1980s to create the so-called Taiwan of the Caribbean. Instead, it had devastating consequences. It failed to industrialize the nation; it led to massive corruption, utter neglect of agriculture, and the creation of vast slums in the vicinity of the so-called industrial zones. Lundahl offers no reason to believe that following the same path in the current conjuncture will lead to a different outcome. In fact, while he applauds the recently inaugurated free-trade area of Caracol in the northeast of Haiti, he acknowledges that things could go very wrong: “Unless social services, housing, urbanized villages, etc. are prepared what you will get is simply a new Cité Soleil or Martissant, with an impatient and disorderly labor pool.”²¹

Thus, it is hard to believe that the neoliberal industrialization that Lundahl advocates is more realistic than prioritizing the development

of agriculture. While privileging the existing structures of rural production, or a return to some idyllic nineteenth-century *lakou* agriculture, would lead to an impasse, there is no convincing reason to assume that the modernization of the countryside need be naïvely utopian. In fact, the launching of a coherent agrarian reform, a transition to higher tariffs, and a public plan of reforestation would do more to employ, feed, and equalize life chances of Haitians than any neoliberal industrialization based on cheap labor and uncertain foreign demand for apparels. On the contrary, what is utopian is to believe that after prioritizing the apparel industry for more than three decades, it can now miraculously generate the virtuous cycle of development, which it has consistently failed to deliver.

This is not to say that export-oriented production should not be part of a development plan, but it should not be its central driving force. The agricultural sector, and particularly food production for the domestic market, should have priority. Again, this recommendation does not amount to a form of peasant triumphalism, nor is it calling for a return to an idyllic pastoral life. Instead, it entails using agriculture to build a modern infrastructure of roads, irrigation canals, and electrical plants. Moreover, labor-intensive methods should be privileged to reduce the high levels of unemployment and the exodus from rural areas. To implement this plan, the Haitian government must first engineer a transition period to impose protectionist measures; the country simply cannot afford to continue to have an open door policy that destroys its domestic economy. This plan is neither radical nor backward looking, but it does conflict with the dogma of the international financial institutions (IFIs) and the interests of powerful domestic and foreign forces. Unless Haitians decide to take matters into their own hands and challenge these forces, any plan of this kind is unlikely to see the light of day.

Taking matters into their own hands is, however, no simple and easy task for Haitians. In this book, I argue that under the weight of an externally imposed neoliberal regime, a quasi-permanent crisis of governability, and the devastating earthquake of January 2010, Haiti has tumbled into the outer periphery. The outer periphery is a new zone of catastrophe and zero-sum politics comprising states under international tutelage or occupation. I contend that while domestic social forces have played a fundamental role in Haiti's collapse, the nation's fall is unintelligible without studying how it was precipitated by the world capitalist system. The patterns of imperial intervention

that Haiti has endured over the years, especially in the aftermath of the quake, have transformed the country into a virtual trusteeship. Integrated into the margins of the margin of the global economy, starved of direct foreign investments, and compelled to engage in ultracheap labor activities for export, Haiti is at the farthest end of the global production process—trapped in the outer periphery.

Notes

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14. Quotation in text translated by the author from the original French: “Le banditisme s’est répandu dans la société comme l’arme de l’individualité monstrueuse et désocialisée. Et cette désocialisation, cette bourgeoisie qui n’a d’haïtienne que l’origine de ses profits y a largement contribué” (Trouillot, “L’affaire Brandt”).

15. Mats Lundahl, *The Political Economy of Disaster* (London: Routledge, 2013), pp. xxiv, 284, 341.

16. *Ibid.*, p. 283.

17. *Ibid.*, p. 341.

18. *Ibid.*, p. 277.

19. *Ibid.*

20. *Ibid.*, p. xxiv.

21. *Ibid.*, p. 292.