

HAITI: WHAT CAN BE DONE?

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Haiti: The Aftershocks of History. By Laurent Dubois. New York: Metropolitan Books, 2012. Pp. 434. \$32.00 cloth. ISBN: 9780805093353.

Haiti after the Earthquake. By Paul Farmer. New York: PublicAffairs, 2011. Pp. xii + 429. \$27.99 cloth. ISBN: 9781586489731.

Fixing Haiti: MINUSTAH and Beyond. Edited by Jorge Heine and Andrew S. Thompson. Tokyo: United Nations University Press, 2011. Pp. xxi + 277. \$35.00 paper. ISBN: 9789280811971.

Library shelves sag under the weight of books on Haiti, old and new. Many were written by Haitians in the nineteenth century. They are exceptional studies challenging racism, but they also probe and dissect with honesty and candor the causes of Haiti's repeated failures at sustained development and good governance. Few areas were left unstudied: French colonial slavery and the demand for reparations, European and American racism, domestic failures to plumb the island's "culture of poverty," ecological devastation, and endemic corruption. Haitian elites, of whatever color and class, never seem to stop searching for solutions. Foreigners have also contributed well-documented tomes on the island's labyrinthine economy and politics.

This long-standing interest has been magnified by one calamity after another: a series of killer hurricanes and, more fundamentally, the devastating earthquake of January 12, 2010. In many ways, the year 2010 could well be said to represent a watershed in Haitian history, even as these tragedies come on top of ongoing structural and systemic problems that have bedeviled the island for the past two centuries. The ravages of overpopulation, environmental devastation, inadequate food and health services, and perhaps most harmful of all, the inability or refusal of the political class to think and act outside its own personal and partisan interests did not start in 2010. One should keep in mind that the United Nations became involved in Haiti in 1990. By 2010, it had seven thousand troops and two thousand police officers from thirty countries in a "stabilization mission" (the UN Stabilization Mission in Haiti, or MINUSTAH) there. Although it is true that many more nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) entered Haiti after the earthquake, there were hundreds of others—no one seems to know how many—already there, feeding, instructing, and healing the sick and needy. Because no sovereign country, and certainly none as deeply jealous of its independence as Haiti, can tolerate such a massive foreign presence for long, the question is, have recent disasters created an opportunity for Haitians and *blancs* (foreigners) to work together to

establish the conditions necessary for national autonomy and sustainability, and from there the eventual withdrawal of the blancs?

The three books under review, which together present the opinions of some twenty-seven authors, were all written after the watershed events of 2010 and are specifically geared toward explaining the origins of Haiti's crisis and what might conceivably be done to fix it.

Paul Farmer's *Haiti after the Earthquake* is composed of his own assessment (239 out of 360 pages) and twelve shorter contributions listed as "Other Voices," virtually all of which were written by authors with ties to Farmer's Partners in Health and Zanmi Lasante medical centers. These admirable centers have operated in rural Haiti and a dozen other countries for decades. Aside from the evident dedication of Farmer and his team to caring for the poor, they know Haiti well and are clearly eager to have their opinions heard.

The opening chapter, a two-page essay by Joia S. Mukherjee, medical director of Partners in Health, sets the book's tone. The tragedy of Haiti, she says, is that it has been the victim of powerful foreign countries for two centuries, "resulting in policies which have served to impoverish the people of Haiti" (xi). From this point on, the interpretative stance of the book is essentially *frappe les étrangers*, or "foreigner bashing," not least in the long essay by Farmer himself. Farmer had made his views very evident in two previous books: *AIDS and Accusation: Haiti and the Geography of Blame* and *The Uses of Haiti*.¹ His dislikes, repeated here in more moderate tones—perhaps because he was serving as deputy special envoy for Haiti under the UN special envoy Bill Clinton at the time of writing—are US investments (whether in tourism, assembly industries, or NGOs), the International Monetary Fund (IMF), and the neoliberal structural reforms that these forces impose on weak countries. In contrast, his likes include Cuban doctors working in Haiti, a sharp contrast to his less-than-generous opinion of other foreign doctors, such as those of Médecins Sans Frontières, which he characterizes as "the home base of disgruntled doctors" (206).

One innovation is Farmer's metaphor of acute-on-chronic. His descriptions of the acute—whether hurricanes, earthquakes, or epidemic cholera—are superb. The three chapters on the occurrence and consequences of the 2010 earthquake will stand as the fundamental account of this tragic event for a long time. They are a testament to Farmer's intimate knowledge of and admirable commitment to Haiti. Some historians and social scientists will nevertheless have different interpretations as to what forces have produced the chronic in Haiti. To Farmer, the culprit of the island's persistent poverty and underdevelopment is easily identifiable: "five centuries of transnational social and economic forces with deep roots in the colonial enterprise" (3). Even the endemic corruption of the elite is blamed on "foreign intervention and meddling," especially by NGOs that have "undermined the Republic of Haiti's capability to fulfill its government mandate" (369n21). In fact, says Farmer, the "free people of Haiti" have been "disrespected in their quest for democracy by an unrelenting series of dictators and coup d'états backed by Western countries" (xii).

1. Paul Farmer, *AIDS and Accusation: Haiti and the Geography of Blame* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992); Paul Farmer, *The Uses of Haiti* (Monroe, ME: Common Courage Press, 2006).

Chapter 4 departs from the day-to-day descriptions of acute tragedies to provide what Farmer calls a necessary understanding of the chronic in Haitian history. To put it generously, he offers a very partial and partisan interpretation, as only former president Jean-Bertrand Aristide and what Farmer terms “the once-united popular movement” are put in a positive light. Farmer had previously held forth on the fall of Aristide, claiming him to be a victim of US and French conniving.² This might well be true, but it is only part of the story of Aristide’s rise and fall. Farmer (and others) might consider consulting Alex Dupuy’s thoroughly documented and argued *The Prophet and Power* (2007). According to Dupuy, Aristide initially had good intentions, but all this ended when he turned to—shall we say—“chronic” authoritarianism, patronage, and clientelism, and the use of terror by his gangs (*chimes*). When Aristide left Haiti in 2004, says Dupuy, he had become “a discredited, corrupted, and increasingly authoritarian president who had betrayed the trust and aspirations of the poor majority.”³ Not surprisingly, Aristide’s security depended nearly completely on sixty former members of the US Special Forces in the employ of a private contractor, the Steele Foundation.

Having read the more than three hundred pages of *Haiti after the Earthquake* without finding a single mention of the critical role that the US Southern Command (SouthCom), out of Miami, played in providing aid to Haiti immediately after the 2010 earthquake, one has to ask, what is wrong with admitting that it is a geopolitical reality of the Caribbean that only the United States had the hospital ships, helicopters, heavy equipment, and lift-and-deliver capacity to provide such aid in the early days of Haiti’s tragedy? It was refreshing, therefore, to read the essay by another member of Farmer’s team, Dr. Louise C. Ivers, chief of mission of Partners in Health in Haiti and assistant professor of medicine at Harvard’s Medical School. Ivers does what Farmer does not: she recognizes the important role of SouthCom, concluding that Haitians “are avid fans” of that assistance from the US military. “Dirty Boots,” the title of her chapter, comes from the many times she heard her Haitian patients say “Look, Dr. Louise, they got their boots dirty” (305)—that is, the US military was willing to do the grimy part of the work. This seems an appropriate lesson for a fact not fully developed by Farmer: both Haitians and blancs need to get their boots dirty to get development going.

Jorge Heine and Andrew S. Thompson, the two editors of *Fixing Haiti: MINUSTAH and Beyond*, take a completely different approach to Haiti’s problems. They contribute a very persuasive introduction and conclusion to this volume, which presents thirteen essays by scholars and military and civilian members of the UN mission. The editors’ basic assessment is amply clear when they lead off with a quotation from UN Secretary General Kofi Annan in 2004: “Haiti clearly is unable to sort itself out and the effect of leaving it alone would be continued or worsening chaos” (1).

2. Paul Farmer, “Who Removed Aristide?” *London Review of Books*, April 15, 2004, http://www.lrb.co.uk/u26/n08/farm01_html.

3. Alex Dupuy, *The Prophet and Power: Jean-Bertrand Aristide, the International Community, and Haiti* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2007), 2.

This leads the editors to an unvarnished explanation of how and why they believe that Haiti became the failed or fragile state that they argue it is. In their view, without stability there cannot be development, and given the present circumstances, Haiti cannot achieve stability on its own. As controversial as this interpretation is, it is a plausible thesis that one must make such a harsh assessment as a first step, indeed as a prerequisite, to stabilizing and then “fixing” Haiti. The contributing authors share this view, as well as Annan’s conclusion that if MINUSTAH were to leave before Haitians themselves ensure such stability, chaos would follow.

Contributors with years of experience in international peacekeeping, such as Gérard Le Chevalier (who died in the earthquake) and the Chilean brigadier general Eduardo Aldunate, provide keen professional insights into the Haitian drama. Equally noteworthy for their thorough documentation and logical acuity are the essays by Robert Maguire and Mirlande Manigat. The latter, wife of a former president and herself a professor of constitutional law and a political leader, offers strong opinions as to what ails her country and specific recommendations as to what it needs. After a scholarly dismantling of the present constitution, which was drawn up in the antidictatorship atmosphere of 1987, Manigat makes a “reasonable plea” for profound revisions, calling in particular for a return to presidentialism, reducing the veto power of the two chambers of congress, and thus doing away with Haiti’s split executive. One can well sympathize with Manigat after noting how the split between the president and congress has led time and again to stalemate and paralysis. That such power plays continue is shameful, as Patrick Sylvain argues in a neat essay describing how a well-meaning and democratically elected politician, René Préval, struggled—largely in vain—to steady the “malversive and teetering nation” (78). The situation today, in 2012, of the also democratically elected president Michel Martelly illustrates Sylvain’s point: the opposition gave him a failing grade for his first year in office despite the fact that their obstructionism prevented him from having a prime minister for more than four months in the course of that year.

The volume also contains expressions of hope and optimism, as in the brief foreword by Paul Collier, who points to the decision of South Korea’s government to build a garment factory in the northeastern interior that will, he predicts, eventually employ twenty thousand people. Because the US Congress has voted to grant duty-free access to garments produced in Haiti, prospects look good. Roads will be built by the European Union and electricity provided by a plant financed by the Inter-American Development Bank. Certainly, with all this international assistance, there is much to be hopeful about. Be that as it may, one cannot help but wonder whether Collier is not caught up in the emotion of the moment. His much admired book *The Bottom Billion* (2007) listed four traps that make countries fail: constant conflict, limited resources, being landlocked with bad neighbors, and bad governance in a small state with rampant corruption. Even a superficial analysis leads one to ascribe Haiti’s underdevelopment to several of these traps. Nevertheless, in 2009, when called on to write the report for the UN initiative headed by Bill Clinton, Collier (who calls Haiti a “fragile state”) concluded: “In stark contrast to other current entanglements with fragile states, Haiti offers the

American and Canadian governments a rare opportunity to demonstrate that their support can lift a society decisively out of fragility.”⁴

Not everyone, however, shares Collier’s faith in the ability of foreign capital to create a labor-absorbing economy of manufactured goods for export. As noted above, Farmer disagrees with this analysis, and in this volume on fixing Haiti, the widely recognized and much-quoted Haitian political scientist Robert Fatton Jr. is vehement in his opposition. According to Fatton, Haiti’s instability and underdevelopment can be traced to two causes. The first is what he calls *la politique politicienne*, the unprincipled struggle for booty and public office by a “privileged or ruling minority” that “persistently manipulates the constitution to preserve its interest in the face of overwhelming popular opposition” (47). Fatton developed this thesis in two excellent books: *Haiti’s Predatory Republic* (2002) and *The Roots of Haitian Despotism* (2007). In the present volume, Fatton appears more interested in the second cause of Haiti’s problems and especially its food shortages: neoliberal development programs driven by the United States and the International Monetary Fund.

Fatton’s postscript, written ten months after the earthquake of 2010, presents a litany of harsh critiques of Haitian neoliberal politics and politicians, and of the Interim Haiti Recovery Commission chaired by President Clinton, claiming that it was this model of development and these people, along with MINUSTAH, that turned Haiti into a “virtual trusteeship” (56). All this leads to Fatton’s central conclusion that “the neoliberal regime imposed on the country” is “the single most critical” cause of the present crisis. It is no surprise, therefore, that Fatton would also recommend that Haiti abandon what he calls “neoliberal extremism” (54). Unfortunately, unless one is ready to specify the programs that a state should abandon, blaming neoliberalism remains in the realm of the ideological debates that have been grist for the mill of chronic oppositionism in Haiti. Interestingly enough, this is precisely the view of distinguished Haitian economist Ericq Pierre, who was nominated as prime minister but derailed for reasons he later revealed. Fatton himself quotes Pierre’s complaint: “From the very beginning of the process, I ran up against the forces of corruption. . . . I also wanted to play with my cards on the table, refusing to fall into the game of those who think they can hide indefinitely behind an anti-neoliberal mask” (47).

In their conclusion, Heine and Thompson hedge their bets as to whether the earthquake will represent a significant watershed in terms of positive governability. They are much more direct, however, in repeating their argument that “at present, the government of Haiti lacks the ability to govern effectively on its own” (255). Having gone this far, they make a most daring and controversial recommendation: given the fragility of the state, Haitians and the international community “will have to accept ‘shared sovereignty’” (255). This mandate would respect Haitian choices and autonomy, but the burden of administration would rest with the international community.

Such a long-term foreign military and administrative presence, let alone a

4. Paul Collier, “Haiti: From Natural Catastrophe to Economic Security—A Report for the Secretary-General of the United Nations,” January 2009, n.p.

trusteeship, is, to put it mildly, anathema to Laurent Dubois, author of a much-acclaimed book on the early years of Haitian independence: *Avengers of the New World: The Story of the Haitian Revolution*.⁵ In *Haiti: The Aftershocks of History*, the story is updated to include the 2010 earthquake. The result is commendable and easily accessible, yet the dominant explanation of causal factors calls for a challenge. According to Dubois, there are two main drivers in Haitian history: the steely determination of the masses to be left alone to enjoy the fruits of the post-plantation system of individual subsistence plots that they fought to establish, and the fact that this passionately defended peasant existence has been continually undermined by foreign interventions and interference. For Dubois, the counterpoint between these two forces explains virtually every aspect of Haitian history, from Toussaint L'Ouverture to Aristide.

This analysis is crude because it is excessively simple, devoid of the sophisticated class-based formulations of C. L. R. James in *The Black Jacobins*, to which, amazingly, Dubois never refers, or of the complex discussion of the interaction of race and class by David Nicholls in *From Dessalines to Duvalier*.⁶ Dubois delivers a glancing critique of Nicholls when he dismisses "the oversimplified racial explanation" (87). Yet time and again, he disregards this critique by resorting to race and color in his own analysis of the constant struggle for supremacy in Haiti. His dominant approach is to juxtapose a frankly romantic vision of peasant society to the assaults of invariably perfidious outsiders: French colonialists, American capitalists, NGOs, MINUSTAH, and even Bill Clinton. "Despite all its tragedy," he argues, "Haiti's past shows the remarkable, steadfast, and ongoing struggle of a people to craft an alternative to the existence that others wanted to impose on them" (10–11). The alternative that Dubois advocates and defends is subsistence agriculture. Such is Dubois's conviction that Haitians had constructed an ideal form of land tenure and agriculture that he makes the following extraordinary claim: "By combining subsistence agriculture with the production of some crops for export, they created a system that guaranteed them a better life, materially and socially, than that available to most other people of African descent in the Americas throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries" (6).

Dubois dismisses any analysis, no matter how well intentioned or well informed, that contends that subsistence agriculture has brought misery to Haiti's peasants. Dubois thus rejects the shock expressed by Victor Schoelcher, who at the time was fighting for emancipation in the French Caribbean, at the "misery and sterility" he witnessed in Haiti in 1841, as well as Schoelcher's conclusion that from the trees of liberty has come nothing but "bitter disappointing fruit." To Dubois, the rural culture condemned by Schoelcher "was driven by a historically constituted set of aspirations and a determined search for autonomy" (114). Going

5. Laurent Dubois, *Avengers of the New World: The Story of the Haitian Revolution* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2004).

6. C. L. R. James, *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L'Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution* (1938; reprint, New York: Vintage Books, 1963); David Nicholls, *From Dessalines to Duvalier* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979).

further, he says that if peasants were so vilified, “of course, it was partly because they had been so successful”; they managed to resist plantation labor “and construct something else in its place” (115). Dubois presents no evidence, eyewitness or otherwise, to support this claim of a better life. In fact, the evidence we do have tends to support Schoelcher’s views. A mission sent in 1930 by the very liberal World Peace Foundation of Boston cites study after study of a truly frightening lack of sanitation and ubiquitous presence of contagious diseases among Haiti’s peasants. “It has been estimated,” said the mission, “that syphilis and yaws affected 80% of the population.”⁷ A decade later, in 1942, having recently completed his Ph.D. at Oxford and then employed by Howard University, Trinidadian Eric Williams cautioned: “We must not be romantic about the question of peasant proprietorship . . . [which is] by itself no solution. . . . Haiti is a glaring example . . . [of the] poor, miserably poor.” Citing a study of 884 rural families, 85 percent of whom ate only one meal a day, and fewer than half of whom owned beds, Williams concluded that the subsistence agriculture that peasants practiced was “an impediment to progress.”⁸

It is telling that the great land reformer Alexandre Petion set the ideal minimum acreage per peasant at thirty acres. Unfortunately, demography—that terrible but inescapable driver of man-land relations—has worked against Haiti from the beginning of nationhood. I know of no statistical record of the average size of peasant farms in Haiti during the past two centuries, but by 1990 it was little more than an acre. That acre is today so exhausted that it provides at best 75 percent of the dietary needs for subsistence. The other 25 percent has to be imported or smuggled across the border from the Dominican Republic. Dubois’s romanticization of subsistence agriculture is reminiscent of Aristide’s claim that Haitian peasants live “in a form of socialism related to their own roots.” Aristide added that the people he hates most are the “liberal economists” who wish to change their lives.⁹

This brings us to the claim repeated so often by Farmer, Dubois, Fatton, and all critics of neoliberalism that, by opening Haiti’s markets to imports of American rice, local production was destroyed. It is true that cheaper imports always have a chilling effect on domestic production, often because of the cost differential. If Haitian rice sold at \$1,200 per metric ton and imported rice at \$800, there was bound to be an impact. However, this does not explain the situation in Haiti as a whole. The fact is that rice production in Haiti has been stagnant for decades, even as rice consumption has increased exponentially—in 1980, Haitians produced 60,000 metric tons and consumed 60,100; in 2010, they produced 70,000 and consumed 400,000.¹⁰ The inability of local producers to meet consumer demand is due to the disastrous erosion and loss of arable or at least exploitable land available to farmers. In 1938, there were 540,000 hectares of arable land; in 1980, there

7. Arthur C. Millsbaugh, *Haiti under American Control, 1915–1930* (Boston: World Peace Foundation, 1931), 20.

8. Eric Williams, *The Negro in the Caribbean* (Westport, CT: Negro Universities Press, 1942), 54–55.

9. Jean-Bertrand Aristide, *Aristide: An Autobiography* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993), 168.

10. US Department of Agriculture Foreign Agricultural Service, *Rice Production and Trade Report* (Washington, DC: Global Information Network, 2010).

were 225,750. As Haiti's population more than doubled, so did the consumption of wood for fuel, which went from seven million cubic meters to twenty million.¹¹

None of this is new. Haiti's most acclaimed peasant novel, Jacques Roumain's *Masters of the Dew* (1944), a work much admired by both Farmer and Dubois, paints a vivid picture of "shining gullies where erosion had undressed long strata of rock and bled the earth to the bone." Roumain knew where the problem lay: "They had been wrong to cut down the trees that once grew thick up there. But they had burned the woods to plant Congo beans on the plateau and corn on the hillside."¹² Naturally, the agricultural stagnation that resulted extends to other food sources and explains the massive migration to urban centers, especially Port-au-Prince. That city had 152,000 inhabitants in 1950, 720,000 in 1980, and today it has an estimated 4 million. How are these millions to be fed? By importing food. Although it is no consolation, Haiti is not alone in having to import food such as rice; today Cuba imports 70 percent of the food consumed by its inhabitants, including 60 percent of the rice.

All of this is to say that Farmer's celebration of Aristide, on the one hand, and Dubois's claim that the overthrow of the traditional elite by Aristide's popular forces demonstrates that Haitians were able to create "a new and better world for themselves" (370), on the other hand, both express the triumph of hope and ideology over experience. Farmer and Dubois ignore the tragic collapse of Haitian peasant agriculture, which has made an alternative source of employment as well as emigration absolutely necessary.

The three books under review and their use of multiple sources make one aware that the study of Haiti has benefited from the attention of many excellent historians and social scientists. Haitians and outsiders alike have tried to explain the island's lack of progress. It is evident from this often excellent literature that accurate diagnoses do not guarantee a solution. In his classic treatise *The Haitian People* (1941), James G. Leyburn expressed a common despair: "How conceivably might this problem be dealt with?" His answer is the "moral imperative" of US and European assistance.¹³ To Mats Lundahl, the solution instead lies in changing the anti-peasant bias of the elite. He concludes by asking, however, whether that bias will ever change.¹⁴ This tendency to end studies on Haiti with a rhetorical question is also evident in Robert and Nancy Heintz's *Written in Blood*: "Are the Haitian people, living endlessly in a perverse continuum, oblivious of their past, doomed always to repeat a history that has been written in blood?"¹⁵ These three good books will probably leave you thinking that solutions are not yet within Haiti's reach. This is as it should be, if we are to join necessary caution to an equally necessary hope that a better future is indeed possible.

11. For a more complete account of this ecological crisis, see Anthony P. Maingot, "Emigration Dynamics in the Caribbean: The Cases of Haiti and the Dominican Republic," in *Emigration Dynamics in Developing Countries*, ed. Reginald Appleyard (Sydney: Ashgate, 1999), 3:178–231.

12. Jacques Roumain, *Masters of the Dew*, trans. Langston Hughes and Mercer Cook (1947; London: Heinemann, 1978), 24–25.

13. James G. Leyburn, *The Haitian People* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1941), 270, 321.

14. Mats Lundahl, *Peasants and Poverty: A Study of Haiti* (London: Croom Helm, 1979).

15. Robert Debs Heintz and Nancy Gordon Heintz, *Written in Blood: The Story of the Haitian People, 1492–1971* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1978), 665.