

<https://internationalviewpoint.org/spip.php?article7368>



Haiti

The past haunts the present in Haiti

- IV Online magazine - 2021 - IV561 - October 2021 -

Publication date: Wednesday 27 October 2021

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Haiti offers the image of a country hit by cyclones and earthquakes, against a background of social misery, ecological disaster and political instability. Some people, unconscious or active racists, do not hesitate to speak of a “cursed” country. The reality is quite different. One only has to know its history, marked by colonialism, imperialism and fierce class exploitation. This article attempts to present its main features.

The Republic of Haiti was born under unique circumstances. The resistance of the slaves who confronted the masters, or *maroons*, the word for those who escaped to the mountains, never ceased. It led, following the Bois Caïman ceremony, to a general uprising in the North in 1791, which led to “independence” in 1804. But “independence” had no material basis and very few means to impose the new nation on its enemies.

In 1804, Haiti was a war-torn territory. The economic infrastructure, including plantations, ports and towns, had been destroyed by fire. The situation was worse in human terms. Most of the colonists and their supporters, both civilian and military, had perished or fled. The slaves, whose number is estimated by historians at half a million, fell en masse during the war. The survivors refused the return to the plantations and the forced labour regime that the new masters resulting from the insurrection wanted to impose on them.

A birth by forceps

Unlike other colonies on the Continent, it was not the colonists who gained independence, but rebellious slaves, 60 per cent of whom were born in various parts of Africa. They arrived on the island without a common language or culture, but managed to free themselves from the main European power, tearing apart, admittedly with the support of yellow fever, about 30,000 soldiers of the best army in the world, commanded by Leclerc, Bonaparte’s brother-in-law. This was far more than the revolution just before in the United States or France.

The European states, like the United States, which had gained its independence ten years earlier, were very hostile to the young republic. The first victory of this magnitude of a slave revolt and the first black republic was treated as a pariah state to be put down, whose example threatened the stability of the colonial world and capitalist accumulation. It was not until 1862 that the United States recognized the Republic of Haiti, after the liberation of the slaves, following the victory of the industrial North over the agricultural South enriched by the slave plantations.

France’s hostility to Haiti’s independence was even greater, because the colony that was called Saint-Domingue was the richest in the Americas. The tobacco planting colonists, who had been ruined by competition from Virginia at the end of the 17th century, left the field open for the development of large plantations of indigos and especially sugar cane. On the eve of the 1791 uprising, with nearly 800 sugar factories, the colony known as the “Pearl of the Antilles” was the world’s largest sugar producer. The enslavement of half a million Africans in the production of sugar and indigo, then coffee and cotton, made the colonists, merchants, shipowners, bankers and French ports rich. Hence Bonaparte’s attempt to re-establish slavery, and then after his defeat and independence, to re-establish colonial rule.

Debt or invasion

Faced with the threat of a new French intervention, the young state occupied the eastern part of the island, a Spanish colony, in 1822, particularly its ports, to confront the threat of invasion and free the slaves. France and President Boyer negotiated an agreement on the recognition by France of the independence of the Republic of Haiti. In 1925, Charles X imposed his text of agreement under the threat of a squadron of 12 French warships equipped with 500 cannons. The agreement included a 50 per cent reduction in customs duties on French goods, a form of re-establishing the colonial trade regime. Above all, it included a debt of 150 million gold francs, reduced under Louis-Philippe to 90 million, a considerable sum. The debt intended to “pay” for the lost land and the “loss” of slaves would hamper development throughout the 19th century.

First decolonized and recolonized

The payment of the debt was based on a tax on coffee exports and, for this, President Boyer imposed a rural code (1826), the basis of a “legal apartheid” between the urban and rural populations. In order to pay off this debt, and then others, the Haitian state accumulated loans. After paying the independence debt, it had to continue to enrich the French banks. One of them created a bank in Haiti that was described as a “rascal” and a state within a state. The debts to the French banks were paid off in 1922, thanks to a large loan from Wall Street under pressure from the US occupiers.

The Independence debt was estimated during the presidency of Jean-Bertrand Aristide at \$21 billion today. His campaign for repayment may have been a factor in his overthrow in 2004. Between war, militarization in the face of the threat of war by France, and ruin by finance, Haiti has not become economically independent. The first decolonized country in what would be called the Third World, Haiti remained isolated and was also the first country to be neo-colonized.

But the worst, if it is possible, came in the 20th century, with the military occupation by the United States, which ushered in more than a century of imperialist domination, which still lasts.

Prisoner of imperialism to this day

In the 1870s, following the collapse of coffee prices, and with debt servicing accounting for 40% of state revenues, foreign companies intensified timber exploitation. At the beginning of the 20th century, US investments in Haiti (e.g. banks, railways, urban transport) were competing with those of Germany. American financiers said they were prepared to invest if Washington took control of business in Haiti. Using serious political unrest as a pretext, the US invaded the country in 1915. Taking advantage of the First World War, they ousted the Germans, whose property was confiscated. They took direct control of the country and its finances. Haiti had never had economic independence. It then lost its legend of political independence. It should be remembered that at the time the United States, inspired by the Monroe Doctrine, increased its imperialist interventions: Cuba and Puerto Rico (1898), Panama (1903), Honduras (1909), Nicaragua (1912), Mexico (1914), Dominican Republic (1916).

The entire administration of the country passed into the hands of the occupiers. In 1917, they created a military corps under their direction, the Gendarmerie. The armed resistance (the “Cacos”), led by Charlemagne Peralte, was defeated in 1920. He himself was assassinated in 1919. Peasants were bombed and massacred, thousands were put in prison or locked up in a camp.

In the service of Wall Street

The 1805 law prohibiting foreigners from owning land is abolished. Many peasants are dispossessed in favour of North American companies. The exploitation of wood and deforestation accelerated. The authorities reintroduce a long-abandoned *corvée*, which is just as heavy and sometimes even heavier than the rural codes of the 19th century. Forced labour was mainly used for the construction of roads essential for exports. Trade was redirected from Europe to the United States. New taxes were created, which, in addition to customs duties, ensured the repayment of debts to US banks.

The year 1929 was marked by a high school and student movement, which triggered martial law, and then by the Marchaterre massacre. But 1929 was also the year of the Great Depression, which diverted President Hoover's attention and led to the departure of the Marines in 1934. In 1936, in a statement to a US Senate committee, Major Butler, former High Commissioner to Haiti, illustrated Lenin's thesis on finance capital in his book *Imperialism, the Supreme Stage of Capitalism*: "I served for 30 years in the most combative units, the Marines. I believe I acted as a highly skilled bandit in the service of Wall Street big business."

Two centuries of fierce class domination

Built shortly after independence, a grandiose citadel stands on a rocky outcrop in northern Haiti. It was built under Henri Christophe, one of the main generals of the revolution, who soon proclaimed himself king. The monument is a source of national pride and shows the determination to protect Haiti from a possible French invasion. The downside is that of the twenty thousand peasants and soldiers who helped build the citadel, two thousand are thought to have died in the process. It seems that they were forcibly conscripted. Reproducing the model in force in the colonial powers, King Christophe created an aristocracy composed of members of his family and military leaders who received state lands as gifts.

The mass of former slaves and their children were subjected to iron discipline and were required to cultivate the large plantations to which they had been chained before the revolution. Christophe ruled the northern part of Haiti until 1820. In the south a republic was established. But there too, the military leaders appropriated much of the colonists' land, which was nationalized after the revolution. Thus, throughout the country, the mass of former slaves were stripped of the land that was theirs. They were also stripped of the fruits of their labour. It was they who struggled to pay the debt of independence.

The peasantry did not like to continue working on plantations that did not belong to them, as in the days of slavery. They wanted their own land. Some cleared unused land in the mountains. Others paid a rent (up to half of the harvest) for plots of land on the estates of large landowners and the state. Others illegally scooped up plots of land from these estates. Others managed to buy plots. On several occasions, the peasants' resistance led to major revolts.

An unfinished revolution

The system established at the beginning of the 19th century continued for a long time. At the top was the head of state, usually the President of the Republic (sometimes for life). Below him were the dignitaries of the regime, who received state land as gifts. Among them were the generals, who commanded a huge army responsible for controlling the peasantry. There were many divisions within the officer caste. A merchant bourgeoisie, initially

stunted, completed the picture of the ruling classes.

The Haitian revolution remained unfinished. It was very soon confiscated by small minorities who fought each other. Christophe had carried a project of national, economic and social development (as did his predecessors Toussaint Louverture and Dessalines). He founded factories and opened many schools. The same was not true of the military-rental class that followed. The modernization of the country was the least of their concerns. It is true that the national budget was heavily burdened by the payment of the Independence debt. But while the state was squeezing the peasants, what was the contribution of the large landowners?

The narrow social base of the ruling elites and their internal divisions made them unable to stand up to international finance and the threats of the great powers. As they went from crisis to crisis, the plundering of public finances soon became one of their *raison d'être*. This activity has remained a characteristic of Haitian political power and a great obstacle to development to this day.

Over the years, a business bourgeoisie became more and more important. Coffee exports were the basis of many fortunes. They enriched large traders, mostly foreign, who settled in the ports. They also became importers and creditors of the state, without ever investing in Haiti. The intermediaries who collected coffee from the peasants and a host of small bankers, loan sharks and brokers profited from the transactions. A whole world that lived as parasites on the backs of the peasantry.

Lumpen bourgeoisie

The US occupation in 1915 opened a new era that is still going on. It was marked in particular by the transformation of the ruling classes and the agrarian crisis. The weight of the big landlords has diminished. In fact, it seems that in Haiti, land ownership has never been sufficient to build very large fortunes. The same has not been true for the commercial and financial sector...not to mention the activities related to cocaine trafficking.

Let's take the example of one of the pillars of the Haitian oligarchy, the Brandt dynasty. It is of foreign origin like most of the very rich families in Haiti. Its founder, an Anglo-Jamaican, arrived during the American occupation. A minister of finance, who had known him during his exile in Jamaica, placed him at the head of a bank. A great schemer close to the government, Oswald Brandt was able to benefit from the nationalization of the assets of German citizens. He soon became a coffee and import-export magnate. Unlike the merchants of the 19th century, the Brandts invested in everything: food factories, land purchases, the creation of a bank, etc. No lucrative sector has been neglected: a few years ago a family offspring was accused of being at the centre of a kidnapping ring. Nevertheless, apart from a few food factories, the Haitian oligarchy has concentrated on finance and import-export. It has remained above all parasitic.

Capitalist globalization

Deforestation and soil degradation began under decolonization. With precarious access to land, very little income, no public investment, and no credit at a reasonable rate, small farmers have always lived from hand to mouth. They have had to make do with archaic tools. They tried to compensate for this handicap with innovative agronomic techniques. But their inventiveness had its limits. As the population grew, new land had to be cleared, reclaimed from steep slopes by slash-and-burn. Fallow periods were shortened to save time, so that during heavy rains there was not enough vegetation to hold the land. During the 20th century, soil erosion and depletion accelerated.

During their occupation of Haiti, the Americans established some large plantations for export commodities. Thousands of peasants were driven off their land. Many went to cut sugar cane in Cuba or the Dominican Republic. The occupiers' plan met with strong opposition and remained unfinished. In the early 1980s, at the end of the Duvalier dictatorship (1957-1986), it was updated by international financial institutions. One of the basic ideas was that Haitian agriculture was not very productive, so it would be wise to leave it to the United States to sell Haitians food. The farms were too small and should be replaced by large estates growing tropical products for the North American market. As cheap and docile labour, the excess peasants were to be overexploited in huge subcontracting workshops for multinational textile and electronics companies. One of the free trade zone projects was even called the Hong Kong of the Caribbean.

In fact, because of Haiti's poor infrastructure and unstable political situation, the assembly plants have created only a few tens of thousands of jobs throughout the country and their numbers have fluctuated greatly over the past 40 years. On the other hand, the sabotage of peasant agriculture has taken place. As one example, the US got President Aristide to reduce tariffs on imported rice to almost nothing. The Haitian rice sector went into crisis as rice imports from the US soared.

From agrarian crisis to ecological disaster

The consequence of the agrarian crisis was a massive exodus to Port-au-Prince. The city grew from 136,000 inhabitants in 1950 to 900,000 in 2009, and more than 1.2 million today despite the deadly earthquake of 2010. The metropolitan area is home to 2.8 million people (about a quarter of the total population) in deplorable environmental conditions. Thus the agrarian crisis has led to an urban crisis, which has greatly aggravated the ecological crisis.

The Haitian state has not managed to escape the fate of a neo-colony. Since the beginning of its history, Haitian society has been marked by great inequalities. Today, both in urban and rural areas, large sections of the population are in a very vulnerable situation. In addition to chronic poverty that affects all aspects of daily life, they are periodically confronted with shocks of all kinds that threaten them and that the predatory state does not provide them with the means to deal with: natural shocks (hurricanes, earthquakes, floods, droughts), epidemics, sudden price rises, political conflicts, riots, and the actions of armed bands.

A unique fate in the Americas

Why is Haiti the poorest country in the Americas?

– In the wake of the independence of the United States (1781), the independence of almost all the countries of the continent was the result of the colonists' desire to rid themselves of colonial exploitation by the metropolis. These countries inherited rulers from the wealthy class, sometimes already from a nascent bourgeoisie. In Haiti, on the other hand, the settlers left the country. The ruling class came from the war for the liberation of the slaves.

– The Republic of freed slaves was immediately placed on the list of nations by the slave powers. Under threat, it had to buy its international recognition from France at the cost of a gigantic debt that hampered its development.

The question remains: how to explain the contrast between Haiti and the Dominican Republic, which share an island the size of Ireland? In 2020, in the UN Human Development Index, the Dominican Republic is ranked 70th and Haiti 170th (out of 198 countries). In 2019, the DR's GDP per capita is seven times higher than Haiti's at \$7,700.

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The Spanish colony (two-thirds of the island in area) became the Dominican Republic in the mid-19th century. Since then, the performance of the two countries has diverged. First there were long periods of instability and then, in the early 20th century, an occupation by the United States. In 1930, General Trujillo, at the head of a National Guard set up by the United States, installed a dictatorship (1930 - 1961). Thirty years later, it was Haiti that experienced the Duvalier dictatorship (Papa Doc, from 1957-1971, then Bébé Doc until 1986). Under Trujillo, the Dominican economy experienced a major agricultural boom supported by a policy of major works and the reception of refugee communities. On the other hand, under the Duvaliers, the economy, already in crisis, was abandoned and declined. It remained focused on low-yield agriculture. Skills and investors fled the country. The situation is further aggravated by the economic embargo imposed by the UN after the military coup against Jean-Bertrand Aristide in 1991.

At the same time, investors were attracted to the Dominican Republic, particularly in tourism and, secondarily, in the assembly industry, after fleeing Haiti, which was hit by poverty and the associated political instability. The Dominican economy then managed to partly dominate that of its neighbour, through its exports, certain services and especially the exploitation of Haitian immigration. For decades, the overexploitation of Haitian immigrants in the sugar cane fields, and later in almost all agriculture and construction, was one of the sources of accumulation of capital invested in other activities.

Translated by **International Viewpoint** from [L'Anticapitaliste la revue](#).

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