Empire and Elites
Opposing Views of Haiti in the Twenty-first Century

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The Political Economy of Disaster: Destitution, Plunder and Earthquake in Haiti.
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Haiti's New Dictatorship: The Coup, the Earthquake and the UN Occupation.

Writing in the aftermath of the earthquake that devastated Haiti in January 2010, Mats Lundahl and Justin Podur attempt to account for the country’s inability to extricate itself from what appears to be a series of deep-seated and unending crises. In The Political Economy of Disaster, Lundahl, a Swedish economist and leading scholar on Haiti, offers an institutional approach to understand the historical roots of the country’s woes. He proposes a neoliberal process of industrialization as the only viable alternative lest the island descend into further poverty and underdevelopment. By contrast, in Haiti’s New Dictatorship, Podur contends that Haiti was on its way to a democratic and progressive transformation under the presidency of Jean-Bertrand Aristide, but that a constellation of domestic elites and foreign powers came together in 2004 to overthrow him, abort this popular transformation, and install a new authoritarian regime.

Lundahl and Podur cover similar historical terrain; they both examine Haiti’s recent past from the fall of the Duvalier dictatorship in 1986 to the present. They pay special attention to the 2000 Aristide regime, its collapse and its political consequences, and they also concentrate on the devastating effects of a series of natural disasters culminating in the earthquake of 2010. Moreover, The Political Economy of Disaster and Haiti’s New Dictatorship share some basic assumptions. Both contend that the Haitian political elite has predatory instincts and has governed in a thoroughly “extractive” mode; both emphasize the country’s dependence on outside financial forces, and both regard the recent election of...
Michel Martelly as a complete “farce.” They depict President Martelly as having received only a minute portion of the eligible vote and as lacking any serious preparation for assuming his new office. Both have a rather pessimistic vision of Haiti’s future though the reasons for their pessimism are quite distinct. Lundahl sees the weight of the country’s unbroken predatory history as a major obstacle to any significant transformation: change that will “take time—if it ever comes” (p. 349). Podur on the other hand contends that the “new dictatorship” imposed on Haitians by imperial forces is the primary impediment to any local progressive movement. Not surprisingly, their analytical framework, and the solutions they propose to move the country toward a new, inclusive, and more prosperous direction, differ markedly.

The modern Haitian problem, in Podur’s eyes, is to a large extent the product of the 2004 foreign-engineered coup that ended Aristide’s democratic regime and violently repressed its popular movement, Lavalas. Alien forces—first American and French troops, and then United Nations forces (MINUSTAH)—occupied the country and established what Podur calls “Haiti’s new dictatorship.” This dictatorship was “imposed from the outside, and is maintained from the outside” (p. 158). Imperial powers led by the United States, France, and Canada, and ultimately supported by progressive Latin American governments like Brazil and Chile, have occupied the country and robbed Haitians of their rights and sovereignty. This foreign coalition was legitimized by a dominant narrative in the mainstream media of North America which presented “a story of Haiti’s President Jean-Bertrand Aristide getting elected, becoming a dictator, and leaving in the face of a popular uprising” (p. 3). According to Podur (p. 40), however, there are in fact two contending versions of Haiti’s politics in the early twentieth century.

One is a story of a leader becoming a dictator and getting overthrown, leaving a basket-case country in a basket-case condition. The second is the story of a popular movement being thwarted in its struggle for democracy and development and ending with a new dictatorship imposed upon it ...
I believe the second story is the truer one.

For Podur, Aristide was actually deposed because he embodied a “popular movement struggling against foreign-imposed constraints on Haiti’s sovereignty” (p. 31). Instead of being a despot, Aristide was in fact a democrat enjoying overwhelming popular support.

Because of his dichotomous model, Podur fails to conceive of a third possible narrative that would be deeply critical of Aristide’s governance and yet neither call for, nor approve of his forced removal from office. Podur’s objective, how-
ever, is to establish that whatever the shortcomings of Aristide may have been, the regimes that followed him, particularly the 2004–2006 interim government of Prime Minister Gérard Latortue, were “far worse” (p. 4). The coup that overthrew Aristide—what Podur calls Aristide’s “kidnapping” by American special forces—was, in his words, nothing but “a delivery into tyranny” (p. 5).

There is little doubt that when elected in 2000, Aristide was Haiti’s most popular politician and that despite committing significant human rights violations (Dupuy 2007), his government was not as repressive as the one that followed it. Podur is also right in emphasizing that Aristide was constrained by a powerful constellation of local and international forces. The Haitian elite supported by the United States, France, and Canada had a visceral dislike for Aristide; they were bent on destabilizing or overthrowing him. Moreover, Aristide’s forced departure seriously damaged the fragile transition to more accountable political structures that were beginning to appear.

This is not to say that the Aristide administration was actively transforming Haiti or laying firm foundations for solid democratic institutions, let alone resisting neoliberal policies and fighting for greater national sovereignty. While Aristide was not the despot that his enemies on the right depict, he had clear messianic and authoritarian tendencies (Dupuy 2007). He continuously identified his persona with the people as if the two were identical. He never established a democratic political structure for his party, Fanmi Lavalas. Aristide’s populist rhetoric emphasized political “movement” under his sole leadership, rather than the development of long-lasting and structured institutions. Not surprisingly, the Haitian state under Aristide was a hollow shell; while this condition was not all his responsibility, he contributed little to make it otherwise. In fact, his fall was symptomatic of his incapacity to unleash state power to stop the advances of a small band of badly trained and unpopular paramilitary thugs.

In spite of his nationalistic and anti-imperialist rhetoric, Aristide’s own security forces were supplied by the Steele Foundation which was in turn composed of American special forces and “was led by someone who came from the Pentagon’s Office of Intelligence” (p. 54), as Podur acknowledges. Podur strangely blames René Préval for Aristide’s decision to keep the Steele Foundation as his security detail, as though Aristide had no alternative but to maintain the same security retinue his predecessor had hired in 1995 (p. 54). Similarly, Aristide’s economic policies had little to do with his anticapitalist rhetoric; they were firmly implanted in the neoliberal terrain. While the global economy imposed major constraints on Aristide’s choices, he did little to offer an alternative to the so-called “Washington consensus.” In fact, as Podur points out, Aristide’s 1994 return to power on the back of 20,000 marines, had “nothing to do with Clin-
ton administration ‘good will’ but rather with his agreement to institute a raft of brutal neoliberal structural adjustment ‘reforms’” (p. 51). In his second term as president, Aristide persisted on this trajectory and embraced the establishment of free-trade zones to take advantage of Haiti’s ultra cheap labor. It is true that he supported increasing the minimum wage of Haitian workers despite the opposition of both the business and international communities, but the “fundamentals” of neoliberalism were never actually challenged.

Podur therefore offers an incomplete picture of the Haitian predicament. He is on very firm grounds in his depiction of Haiti’s loss of its sovereignty and his analysis of the deleterious consequences of continuous imperial interferences and machinations. He is also right in pointing out that contemporary Haiti “has a special governance structure, in which many of the functions that are normally performed by government are done by nongovernmental organizations” (p. 38). But he is on shakier grounds in his contention that Aristide represented a fundamental rupture with Haiti’s authoritarian zero-sum politics. While his election to the presidency in 1990 held the promise of such a rupture, the violent coup of September 1991 that overthrew him and decapitated the Lavalas movement generated a series of political transformations that ended the dreams of a new Haiti. The modes of Aristide’s return to power in 1994 emasculated any serious economic reforms and contributed to the revival of the politics of the belly, which overwhelmed his second presidential term.

In addition, Lavalas fragmented as many of its major intellectual and political figures defected from Aristide. While Podur acknowledges these defections, he dismisses them as having simply succumbed to the wrong narrative of Haiti’s most recent history.

The problem with Podur’s interpretation is that he ignores certain realities of Lavalas’s rule, particularly during Aristide’s second term in office. Lavalas, as I have argued elsewhere, had “increasingly evolved into an unsteady and divided ‘accumulation alliance’, as its claims on state revenues could no longer satisfy all its constituent parts” (Fatton 2002:151). Moreover, the imperial powers’ drastic cut in assistance exacerbated Lavalas’s prebendal crisis, emboldened Aristide’s foes, and destabilized the political system. Lacking prebendal resources, Aristide could no longer “oil” the alliance. His erstwhile supporters and his domestic and foreign opponents seized the opportunity to form a coalition that ultimately forced his departure. In fact, it was a revolt of his own chimè (armed gangs), the “Cannibal Army” in Gonaïves, that began the paramilitary offensive against Aristide. Aristide’s rule thus faced its own internecine demons, a determined and armed opposition and an array of imperial machinations. The confluence of these factors left him with no option but succumbing to a forced exile.
Mats Lundahl tends to agree with this account of Aristide’s fall. Moreover, he depicts the Lavalas leader as “simply one more link in the chain of kleptocrats who had ruled Haiti since 1804. His interests had nothing to do with those of the Haitian masses” (p. 92). Unlike Podur, Lundahl sees little difference between Aristide’s government and those that preceded and followed it. They were all predatory and authoritarian even if a few never degenerated into brutal dictatorships. They were all exclusionary, bent on monopolizing power and silencing the opposition.

From Lundahl’s perspective, the Haitian problem has been the historically persistent presence of “extractive” rather than “inclusive” economic institutions. While the latter establish the rule of law, protect property and contract, and generate open, competitive, and efficient markets, the former extract resources from the population, undermine economic activities, and promote the exclusive interests of rulers and their cronies (pp. 321–22). Moreover, Lundahl contends that while economic institutions “determine whether a country is prosperous or poor, it is the political institutions that determine which type of economic institutions a country has” (p. 322). Not surprisingly, extractive societies like Haiti that have noninclusive patterns of governance are condemned to a vicious cycle of continued depredation and underdevelopment. In this political environment, according to Lundahl, “ruling groups or elites come and go, but the system as such reproduces itself. All contenders for power are in the game for the same purpose, and whatever change takes place is a change in name only” (p. 324).

In Lundahl’s view, Haiti is stuck in a systemic crisis after enduring a series of “critical junctures,” ranging from natural catastrophes to major world events, which have failed to engender any positive economic transformation (pp. 333–341). The question then is what event or institutional change could set the country on a virtuous cycle. He argues that this would require the application of the impersonal and unbiased rule of law, which is indispensable to foment economic growth and inclusive institutions. Lundahl, recognizes, however, that in Haiti’s “specific historical circumstances,” the legacy of unbroken “extractive and kleptocratic institutions” weighs heavily against such an outcome.

This is not to say that everything is bleak. In fact, Lundahl argues forcefully that the country can find a way out of its predicament by adopting a neoliberal mode of industrialization. More specifically, 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 (pp. xxiv, 284, 341). He rejects as “utopian” (p. 283) any plan that would privilege the development of agriculture and food sovereignty. As he explains on p. 341,
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.

According to Lundahl, prioritizing agriculture not only leads to poor economic outcomes, but is also impractical given extreme soil erosion, high man-land ratio, and the lack of an effective titling system. He approvingly quotes Uli Locher who bluntly asserted in his study of land distribution, tenure, and erosion that “rural Haiti as we know it is doomed” (p. 277). In addition, Lundahl (p. 277) 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 mountainsides. For the process to be reversed, the man-land ratio must decrease, not increase.

Not surprisingly, Lundahl argues that reducing the rural population can only be achieved 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” (p. xxiv).

The problem with Lundahl’s argument is that the strategy he espouses was adopted by Jean-Claude Duvalier’s 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 and 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 would 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” (p. 292).

It is hard to believe that the neoliberal industrialization Lundahl advocates is more realistic than prioritizing the development of agriculture. While he is
correct in contending that 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 naively utopian. In fact, the launching of a coherent agrarian reform, a transition to higher tariff, 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 demands for apparel. 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.

Haiti’s problem is not merely its predatory elite and zero-sum politics. Its problem is also the neoliberal orthodoxy imposed on the nation’s fragile structure of production by an array of imperial nations and organizations. To that extent, *The Political Economy of Disaster* and *Haiti’s New Dictatorship* complement each other. The former offers a comprehensive understanding of the internal dynamics of Haitian politics and its persistent institutional failures, while the latter explores the depth of the country’s dependence and indeed its virtual loss of sovereignty. Whatever shortcomings these books may have, both are important contributions to our understanding of contemporary Haiti. While Lundahl offers the best available institutionalist and neoliberal analysis of the country’s political economy, Podur advances a cogent articulation of the havoc created by continuous imperial interventions in the domestic affairs of the island. These two books should interest anyone looking for insights into Haitian complexities in the aftermath of the earthquake of 2010. They offer contrasting understandings of the country’s ills and open the door to fruitful debates and research.

References
