Millery Polyné (ed.)


_The Idea of Haiti_ is a welcome addition to the growing corpus of scholarly works written on Haiti since the 2010 earthquake. Divided into three sections (“Revolution/Crisis,” “Person/Dehumanization,” and “Aid”), the volume comprises a broad range of perspectives on issues related to the earthquake, and to the ways in which history created the particular circumstances that led to such human and material devastation on January 12, 2010.

Robert Fatton Jr.’s essay explores the “politics of catastrophe,” the roots of which he sees in colonial times, and the authoritarian tradition generated by the French and subsequently mirrored in the “patterns of despotism” that have shaped Haitian political history since 1804. In this regard, his concerns are similar to those expressed by Millery Polyné in the introduction, when he writes of “the history of race and development” and the particular ways in which that history has determined the relative impact of similar natural events in the Americas, such as the earthquake in Chile in 2010. Analyzing print media following the events in Haiti and Chile, writes Polyné, “entrenches the reader into a discourse of Haitian life as antimodern, violent, and perpetually ill-equipped if one properly situates Haiti in the historical and regional context of antiblack, anti-Haitian prejudice” (p. xix).

Nick Nesbitt largely echoes Polyné in asserting that the earthquake was “no mere natural event,” and in his denunciation of the “political catastrophe wrought from forcible underdevelopment and structural precariousness,” which he sees as the fundamental reason for the extent of human and material damage that followed the Haitian event (p. 5). Nesbitt is perhaps one of the most forceful of all commentators in arguing for the external causes of Haiti’s underdevelopment, writing that “The destruction of Haiti is [...] strategic” (p. 5). He places Haiti at the “very center” of Atlantic modernity, viewing it as a model of democratic “self-identity” manifested most explosively in the revolution, but also in the defense of “democratic empowerment” as well as the “protection of these rights of the disenfranchised by all means available,” which “casts the specter of rightful violence before the illegitimate violence of regime change, intervention, and the incursions of global violence” (p. 5). One finds here in Nesbitt’s passionate defense of Haiti a righteous denunciation of the United States, but that passion risks overflowing at times into hyperbole and empty veneration, and indeed creating another fantasy of Haiti as a glorious and virtuous victim of uniquely external forces—a site where violence is “rightful” because it is intended to hurt the foreign oppressor, when in truth his-
tory shows that violence harms almost exclusively those at the lower end of the social hierarchy. The “underdevelopment” of Haiti, he argues, calls for an “ever-renewed process of critical, partial historiography” (p. 5). Partiality may serve to promote a certain idea of Haiti, but it is debatable if it furthers a proper and complete understanding of the causes of Haiti’s “underdevelopment.” It seems self-evident that balance and impartiality would lead to a fuller comprehension of the complexities of Haitian history and society, and in particular the internal factors that are largely ignored by Nesbitt but are nonetheless crucial in creating Haiti as it is now.

The failure to create a functioning Haitian state cannot be due solely to the interventions of external powers, as many of the other scholars in the volume point out. For instance, writing on the immediate post-earthquake period, Patrick Sylvain focuses on the failure of a particular Haitian politician, President René Préval, to articulate the “state vision” of how Haiti should react to the disaster. Sylvain critiques the “executive silence” that followed the earthquake, most notably that of Préval himself, whose silence is judged to be unethical “in moments of a catastrophic challenge” (p. 90). Such silence and inaction on behalf of the state’s representatives is far from new, as Sylvain argues: “The landscape of indifference is so deeply rooted in the nation’s history that silence by Haitian executives has created a political culture of ineptitude and passivity” (p. 91).

Greg Beckett writes on the theme and meaning of “crisis” in Haiti, proposing that the body is the primary site upon which economic and political forces are manifested. He argues that Haitians “experience the world system in a direct and unmediated way, as something that happens to them,” and that “hunger, illness, violence, and death are the concrete ways in which people experience the effects of abstract systems such as capitalism” (p. 43). Similarly, Sibylle Fischer underscores the importance of the body in Haitian history—the way in which the revolution was regarded by foreign observers “not as a political event with political goals ... but as a matter of bloodshed, rape, and boundless material destruction” (p. 70). Accounts of this kind “prepared the ground for an imaginary that looks to Haiti to see only this: insurrectonal bodies, tortured bodies, bodies in trance” (p. 71).

There are further revealing and engaging chapters by, for example, Wien Weibert Arthus on the notion of progress and development, Mark Schuller on the cholera epidemic in the tent cities or camps, and Karen Richman and Elizabeth McAlister on the religious dimensions of the disaster. The final chapter (“Twenty-First-Century Haiti—A New Normal?”) is an excellent discussion between Alex Dupuy, Robert Fatton Jr., Évelyne Trouillot, and Tatiana Wah on the prospects for change in Haiti. While many early postearthquake works
speak of a radical rupture in time and the beginning of a new historical epoch, the more time passes the more those ideas seem to lose validity. Trouillot questions the idea of a “new Haiti,” and relates it to previous moments in history when change seemed about to happen, notably the end of the Duvalier regime in 1986 and the election of Jean-Bertrand Aristide in 1991. Fatton speaks of the sense that things would change in the immediate aftermath of the earthquake, that a “new solidarity” would be established. The problem, he says, is that “the old reflexes and divisions reasserted themselves very quickly” (p. 245). Dupuy condemns Haiti’s political and economic elite as “completely bankrupt ideologically, in terms of what Haiti could become” and is similarly skeptical about the idea of a “new Haiti,” which as he says was not coined by Haitians, but the international community. Dupuy traces the political elite’s opposition to change back to the time of Dessalines and Pétion, and to Boyer’s agreement to pay the indemnity to France to renew trade and diplomatic relations with the rest of the developed capitalist world, to find the “roots of Haitian dependence,” which now appears urgent as the earthquake has exposed Haiti’s complete inability to rebuild itself with its own resources. The volume ends on this note, with a sense that the earthquake is already but one more event in a history of turbulent episodes that seem to promise change, but which have yet to prove strong enough to truly shake the foundations of Haitian society.

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