

Review Articles



Surviving Crises, Catastrophes, and Peace-Keeping Forces in Haiti

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Peter Orner & Evan Lyon (eds.), *Lavil: Life, Love, and Death in Port-au-Prince*. London & New York: Verso, 2017. 336 pp. (Paper US\$ 24.95)

Eirin Mobekk, *UN Peace Operations: Lessons From Haiti, 1994–2016*. London & New York: Routledge, 2017. 218 pp. (Cloth US\$ 155.00)

Since the fall of Jean-Claude Duvalier's dictatorship in 1986, Haiti has endured an unending transition to democracy punctuated by military coups, failed elections, natural disasters, and foreign interventions. In spite of these adversities, compounded by growing social polarization, and multiple forms of insecurity, Haitians have managed to carry on; they have mastered the arts of surviving natural and man-made catastrophes. The two books under review seek to explain on the one hand how Haitians describe in their own words experiencing such hard times, and on the other why foreign intrusions in the form of U.N. peacekeeping forces failed in their mission to bring stability and democracy to the country.

Lavil: Life, Love, and Death in Port-au-Prince and *UN Peace Operations: Lessons From Haiti, 1994–2016* provide very different perspectives on Haiti's contemporary realities. *Lavil* is part of Verso's *Voice of Witness* book series, which seeks to offer personal narratives that are "accessible, thought-provoking, and ultimately humanizing perspectives on what can often seem like impenetrable

topics" (p. 27). Built on more than 100 interviews of Haitians conducted over a five-year period in the aftermath of the devastating earthquake of January 12, 2010, it provides an oral history of life in the country's capital, Port-au-Prince—known in Creole as *Lavil* ("the city"). It is told from the point of view of its residents—those who were born there, migrated from the countryside, or were deported from the United States. While *Lavil* is intended for a general public and "decidedly non-academic" (p. 20), it captures vividly the travails of daily life in Port-au-Prince.

In contrast, *UN Peace Operations* is a scholarly book that seeks to explain why Haiti's future remains "bleak" (p. 179) in spite of more than two decades of U.N.-led efforts to stabilize, democratize, and demilitarize the country. It concentrates on the motivations, interorganizational conflicts, and plans of the international community rather than on Haitian perceptions and understandings of their own realities. Eirin Mobekk shows clearly that U.N. agencies had neither a coordinating framework nor a "strategic approach" to guide their mission in Haiti. Not surprisingly, the United Nations was never able to fulfill the objectives of its mandate. Moreover, Mobekk claims convincingly that the United Nations and other international bodies never succeeded, even when they belatedly intended, to enlist the support of domestic forces for their peacebuilding and democratizing project. In her view, "local ownership" was simply lacking in Haiti. But it was not merely a matter of a lack of local ownership, it was also that the Haitian political and economic elites had no desire to develop a meaningful "social contract" between rulers and ruled. In Mobekk's view, the absence of a "national will" to change Haitian circumstances and the severe inadequacies of the United Nations have prevented any fundamental restructuring of the country's fragile institutions, politics, and economy.

Haiti's institutional fragility, aggravated by unending political crises and natural catastrophes, is well reflected in the individual stories recounted in *Lavil*, which poignantly illustrate the acute sense of insecurity besieging the vast majority of the population. It is an insecurity that is all-encompassing, caused by the travails of poverty, unemployment, disease, violence, and injustice. While it produces a constant struggle for survival and moments of despair and resignation, it is seldom devoid of aspirations for a better life. In fact, a common thread of the majority of the individual narratives is the conviction that parents have the obligation to sacrifice for the future well-being of their sons and daughters. This in turn is the way to insure the parents' own old age. Evans Désir, a coal seller, explains that in the absence of money, "My wife and I often prefer not to eat. I always do my best for my children because I know that they'll help me in the future" (p. 132). While the family is in many instances a haven in a heartless world, it can also be a source of frustrations and vio-

lence. Women are often the victims of sexual predations and abandonment by their husbands or partners. In addition, the severe misery confronting rural families has compelled them to send their children to work in Port-au-Prince as *restaveks*. The *restavek* embodies an “informal system of de facto slavery that involves the importation of young children, mostly girls” (p. 209). Thus, for most residents of Port-au-Prince life is harsh, a daily attempt to “*chache lavi*”—to make a living (p. 263). This struggle to survive became even more desperate with the earthquake of 2010, which in an instant killed more than 220,000 people and destroyed *Lavil's* already poor infrastructure.

The people of Port-au-Prince did not surrender to the devastation; in fact, in the immediate aftermath of the earthquake the acute divisions of class and color essentially dissolved and brought a rare moment of Haitian solidarity. Bonhomme Peterson, a refrigerator mechanic, captured well the hopes of this moment: Haitians, as he put it, “loved each other ... I thought that life was going to be good after the earthquake ... I thought that the Haitian mentality would change” (p. 232). Unfortunately, that fraternity was short-lived; the old patterns reasserted themselves. Peterson lamented that “things are going back to how it was before ... Haiti is a great country; the government is what is bad” (p. 232). Most of the individual narratives share this understanding of the country's politics as predatory, and its justice system as virtually nonexistent. Adrienne Phatal, whose daughter, Loutchama, died because of a lack of medical attention after suffering severe back injuries from the earthquake, and a violent rape, had nothing but utter contempt for Haiti's rulers and law. In Phatal's blunt words: “I hate my country now. Why? Because of this justice system. It only exists on paper. I never found justice for Loutchama” (p. 150).

Some of the people interviewed viewed the absence of justice as a symptom of a great divide between on the one hand rulers and their allies in the economic elites and on the other the rest of the population. They interpreted this chasm as a rupture with the ideals of Haiti's founding fathers, especially Jean-Jacques Dessalines. The Revolution of 1804 sought equality and equal rights, but now in their eyes, Haiti had huge disparities reflecting a perverse politics of color. In the words of Winter, a social worker from *Lavil's* largest slum, *Cité Soleil* (p. 160),

If Dessalines could live again, he would be very disappointed, because he didn't fight for *this* Haiti. Now we have social inequalities between Haitians. Instead he was fighting for a free and united Haiti. Today people say that if you live up in the mountains you are the son of light-skinned Pétion and if you live down in Port-au-Prince you are the son of dark-skinned Dessalines.

These deep divisions have exacerbated an unending series of political crises that have further aggravated the historically significant pattern of foreign intrusions into the country's domestic affairs. For more than 30 years, the so-called "international community," led by the United States and France, has transformed Haiti into a virtual trusteeship of the United Nations. The undermining of Haiti's sovereignty is a disgraceful reality for Winter, who bluntly states: "today we are occupied by the United Nations. Dessalines would have been ashamed to see it ... [had he] come back to life again, he would have died immediately after because he didn't fight for this" (p. 160).

This mixture of anger and resignation amidst economic and existential insecurity is soothed by religious beliefs in the protective and redemptive power of God. For those like Nadege Pierre who "have nothing," they have nonetheless "confidence in God" (p. 264). Benita Manda, a mother of eight living in the resettlement of *Koray* in the periphery of Port-au-Prince, put it clearly: "It's only prayer that's holding Haiti together, a lot of prayer ... God loves me. He protects me from everything that's happening" (p. 178). Moreover, religion and specifically *Vodou* can offer a "safe space" to historically marginalized and condemned gay, lesbian, and transgender minorities. As Charlot Jeudy, a lawyer and LGBT activist, explains: "Vodou is the most tolerant religion to homosexuals. Vodou suggests the possibility of possession by loas, becoming inhabited by another spirit ... When Erzuli Dantor possesses a man, that man acts like a woman" (p. 191). Thus, in spite of a set of thoroughly debilitating material, political, and historical circumstances, Haitians have managed to create a delicate bricolage of cultural, religious, and individual practices that allows them to carry on and to entertain some hope for the future. The strength of this volume is that it gives to Haitian voices from below the capacity to be heard unfiltered by theoretical or ideological straitjackets.

In contrast, *UN Peace Operations: Lessons From Haiti, 1994–2016* is not about Haitian voices, but rather about uncovering the reasons for the failures of the recent series of interventions by the United Nations in Haiti. These interventions came in two waves.

The first one (1993–2001) paved the way for Jean-Bertrand Aristide's return to the presidency in October 1994, and aimed to establish the conditions for democratic rule in the wake of the coup that overthrew him in 1991. Comprised of six missions, it sought to bring stability and security to the country. Its objectives were to professionalize the military, develop an effective police force, generate law and order, and ultimately create a political climate favorable to democratization. After seven years of their travails, the six missions ended in failure. The military was disbanded, the police remained a weak, corrupt, and politicized institution, violence and kidnappings spread, and social as well

as political polarization redoubled. Eirin Mobekk puts it succinctly: the U.N. “intervention to restore democracy had unraveled” (p. 168). In fact, when the United Nations left in 2001, Haiti was entering a new period of systemic crisis that degenerated into a violent power vacuum which in turn led to the forced departure of President Aristide and the eventual return of the United Nations in 2004.

The second wave of interventions, called the “Mission des Nations Unies pour la Stabilisation en Haïti” (MINUSTAH), had a larger mandate. It was charged with disarming and demobilizing paramilitary groups and urban gangs and reintegrating them into civilian life. Moreover, the police forces as well as the system of justice were to be completely reformed; and a new, independent, and professional electoral system was to be established to ensure free and fair elections. Ultimately, MINUSTAH was to guarantee the development of a peaceful, secure, and democratic Haiti. While Mobekk argues that MINUSTAH’s “robust” tactical “operations” against armed groups, especially in the urban slums, contributed to a substantial improvement in Haiti’s security and stability, she claims convincingly that the causes of the violence had not been removed. In fact, the gains made were not sustainable because they did not change the material and political conditions that generated the violence in the first place. As she explains: “Although MINUSTAH from the beginning viewed poverty and disparity as root causes of the instability, and ‘economic reactivation as a major priority of the new government’, these operations could only establish the space where these causes of violence could be tackled” (pp. 47–48).

The problem is that neither Haitian rulers and economic elites, nor the United Nations and its powerful patrons had the capacity or the will to effect the type of reforms that might have resulted in an inclusive pattern of economic development. While Mobekk is convincing in indicting the behavior of Haiti’s dominant classes for resisting the “rule of law and democratization,” she is much more nuanced and charitable in excusing U.N. failings and those of other international agencies of development. In the case of the former, she rightly points out that its material and political interests are inimical to any significant redistribution of power; but when it comes to the latter, the flaws in their operations seem to be caused by a lack of bureaucratic coordination and/or misunderstanding of Haiti’s polarized social structure. Thus, Mobekk emphasizes correctly that the Haitian elite’s conviction that the “Haitian population is not ready for democracy” was not a matter of “ethnic, cultural, or religious divisions,” but rather a reflection of privileging and maintaining its class dominance (p. 166). And yet, while she argues convincingly that the blindness of the United Nations to this obvious reality and deliberate choice to work “closely”

with this very class that “disenfranchised the majority of Haitians” had deleterious implications for democratization and the rule of law, she blames these decisions on insufficient understanding or poorly devised policies.

Similarly, Mobekk admits that in its quest to pacify the slums of Port-au-Prince, MINUSTAH had used military and counterinsurgency measures resulting in “collateral damage” (p. 40), which while regrettable had created a “stability dividend” (p. 41). The problem in her eyes is that this dividend was not “utilized effectively by developmental actors” (p. 41). In the same vein, she could have been much more forceful in her condemnation of the ways the United Nations managed the cholera epidemics that its own peacekeepers introduced into Haiti. While she points out that it “immediately dismissed the potential for peacekeepers’ involvement in the cholera outbreak” only to “acknowledge [six years afterwards] that it played a role in the outbreak” (p. 46), she does not suggest any remedy for the 10,000 people that it killed. What is clear is that the violence of MINUSTAH and its role in the cholera epidemics alienated most Haitians.

Mobekk fails to analyze the unequal nature of the world system within which the United Nations is exercising its missions and peace-keeping operations. The goal of that system is neither meaningful democratization nor redistribution of economic and political power, but rather social order and stability and the spread of market reforms that ultimately serve the interests of a globalized financial elite. To expect different results from those achieved by MINUSTAH in Haiti is rather naïve. The type of changes she suggests to rationalize U.N. peace operations might well improve their performance, but they are unlikely to bring about equity or popular participation in societies besieged by civil strife. Mobekk is right, however, in concluding that Haitians themselves are responsible for building their own democracy. Given that Haiti’s history is in part one of continuous foreign interventions into its domestic political affairs, we may wonder if the country will ever be given that opportunity. In spite of MINUSTAH’s withdrawal from the country in October 2017 and the restoration of the Haitian army, it is unlikely that Haitians will be able to seize this opportunity. In fact, a small police contingent comprising the newly created United Nations Mission for Justice Support in Haiti (MINUJUSTH) has replaced the departed MINUSTAH. Thus, the country will remain under the tutelage of a foreign military presence whose size and coercive power are likely to vary depending on the international community’s own assessment of Haiti’s political stability.

In spite of their different methodologies and objectives, the two books reviewed here provide interesting perspectives into the last three decades of Haiti’s travails. While they may have different audiences, they complement

each other in the sense that they tend to capture the gap existing between the daily concerns of average Haitians and the objectives of a distant international community and its allies in the Haitian elite. It is unfortunate, that the price of Mobekk's book is astronomical and will limit its readership.