

Robert Fatton, Jr., *The Guise of Exceptionalism: Unmasking the National Narratives of Haiti and the United States*. New Brunswick NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2021. xi + 226 pp. (Paper US\$ 34.95)

In this extraordinary book,¹ Robert Fatton offers a trenchant comparative analysis of the ideology of exceptionalism as it was deployed in the United States and Haiti to extol the world-shaking revolutions that led to the first two independent nation-states in the New World, in 1776 and 1804, respectively. Defining exceptionalism as the belief that each nation is unique, Fatton shows how it shapes the narratives that set nations apart from one another and enabled them to assume, and in some cases impose, their superiority over others by force, as was the case when the United States invaded and occupied Haiti from 1915 to 1934.

Power relations, therefore, both within and between countries, lie at the root of exceptionalism. Dominant classes create and deploy their narratives through various channels—intellectuals, media, educational institutions—to justify their actions. Subordinate classes or groups—racial/ethnic minorities, women, gays/lesbians/transgenders—also use it to advance their particular interests. As an ideology, exceptionalism is fluid and contradictory. Moreover, a country's claim of exceptionalism can become unpersuasive or meaningless when the country can no longer satisfy the material needs and aspirations of its citizens or invoke exceptionalism to impose its will over others.

From this perspective Fatton analyzes the specific national narratives of the United States and Haiti that are rooted in their successful anticolonial revolutions, against England and France, respectively. Both colonies had been predicated on a hierarchical racial system of White supremacy. After it won its independence, the United States created a *Herrenvolk* state that excluded Blacks as well as women and others not classified as White from full citizenship until the civil rights and women's movements in the twentieth century. As he points out, the objective of the struggles by these groups was to seek recognition and equal participation in the society to achieve their potential, but not to transform the country's social or class structures. The United States, he further argues, succeeded in asserting its hegemony globally as it became the most powerful country in the world economically and militarily in the twentieth century.

The revolution against France and slavery in Haiti shattered the myth of White supremacy but created a new version of exceptionalism by defining itself

1 Full disclosure: I read and commented on the draft chapters of this book.

as a Black nation. Nonetheless, there emerged a new propertied and dominant class including both mulattoes and Blacks which originated in the colonial era and the Revolution and exploited the vast majority of the former slaves and their descendants who comprised the new subordinate peasant and working classes. Those dominant class factions not only formulated their own racist ideologies of *mulatrisme* and *noirisme*, respectively, but also considered the overwhelmingly Black lower classes as inferior. These two factions also competed to control the state, which in turn led to authoritarian rule and its *habitus*, which includes using the state as a source of personal enrichment. For this reason, Haitian exceptionalism rested on shaky grounds. The U.S. occupation shattered that foundational myth, but the appeal to race and color remained as arsenals in the struggle for power after the marines left.

Conditions did not change for the vast majority of Haitians after the popular struggles against the Duvalier dictatorships (1957–86) and the transition to democracy. The spoils of class continued to be appropriated by the tiny minority of the property-owning and business class and the holders of state power. Haiti became a net exporter of labor to more developed countries in the Caribbean, the United States, and Canada, and increasingly reliant on their remittances that are now the life blood of the economy. Even if many Haitians, including those who emigrated, continue to celebrate the exceptional achievements of the Haitian Revolution, it is clear that the mantra of Haitian exceptionalism is entirely fictional.

There is one aspect of Fatton's argument that he could have expanded upon to make his critique of U.S. hegemony and exceptionalism even more iron-clad. For example, the United States suffered a humiliating defeat in Vietnam; could not prevent the September 2001 attack on U.S. soil or defeat the Taliban in Afghanistan; could not overthrow regimes it deems inimical to its interests (Iran, Cuba, Venezuela, Syria); and faces serious economic and political challenges from China and Russia in different parts of the world. What role do these factors play in the claim of American exceptionalism?

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