Empire and Elites

Opposing Views of Haiti in the Twenty-first Century

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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-