

“The power is real and it is what animates the way forward”

Introduction

This article is an attempt to explain the political situation faced by the people of Haiti as described in the book *Damming the Flood* by Peter Hallward. The main text of the article has been constructed out of quotations from the book - I did not write any of it. Relevant paragraphs and sentences have been stitched together in the hope of coherently re-presenting certain aspects of the book. Sometimes the context will be confused by this process but care has been taken to avoid this. For brevity's sake much of the original detail and balance has been left out.

The book is about particular issues that confront Haiti's struggle for independence from colonialism - past and present. I have tried to summarise parts of the book that interested me and which I think are important for our understanding of how we, people living in Britain, can support people living in Haiti. If this article is of interest I recommend that you read *Damming the Flood*. It is available to buy at The Exchange gallery (and all good bookshops) and the Penzance Library has two copies. Regrettably much important information has been left out of this pamphlet, in particular the effects of the earthquake and the 2010 Haitian elections. For further reading see the end of the article. The purpose of this pamphlet, then, is to raise awareness about the political situation in Haiti; to encourage people to read *Damming the Flood*; and to invite people to meetings being held at The Exchange (see the end of the article).

Although Haiti is routinely described as "the poorest country in the western hemisphere," most such descriptions neglect to point out that this poverty is the product of a long and deliberate history. As Jean-Bertrande Aristide, former president of Haiti, never tired of explaining, Haiti's exceptional poverty is the result of an exceptional history, one that extracted an equally exceptional wealth. "Haiti is poor *because* of the rich," he pointed out in 1988, and it's a point that he had to keep on making. "Poverty today is the result of a 200-year plot [. . .]. In 1803 and in 2003, this is the same plot. Do you understand my message?"(1)

Life in Haiti

Throughout both its colonial and post-colonial history, all significant social and economic power in Haiti has been concentrated in its tiny ruling class. Just 1 percent of Haiti's population controls more than half of its wealth,(2) while the great majority of the people endure harrowing levels of poverty. [In 2007], the official minimum wage in Haiti (in the few places where any sort of minimum is enforced at all) amounts to no more than \$1.80 a day. People lucky enough to have regular jobs in the factories, schools or hospitals of Haiti's cities now survive on the brink of destitution. The remittances that Haitian emigrants send back to their families [are] currently worth a full third of Haiti's GDP.

Only around 35 percent of students [...] complete primary school, and just 4 percent graduate from secondary school. More than one in twenty people are HIV-positive, and perhaps one in five children die before their sixth birthday.(3) More than a third of the population has no regular access to safe drinking water.(4) Most of Haiti's people [survive] by gleaning subsistence crops from tiny plots of land on hillsides long devastated by deforestation, soil erosion and over-use.

Women generally work 11-hour shifts, making anything between \$1.50 to \$3 a day; needless to say they can be fired without notice, have no meaningful trade union representation and are not eligible for any overtime-, maternity-, sick-, or vacation-pay. (5)

[During the] René Préval and Jean-Bertrande Aristide [- Fanmi Lavalas - administrations](6) some 195 new primary schools [were built], together with 104 new secondary schools (building on an initial total of just 34). Between 2001 and 2004, primary school enrolment rates rose slightly, 68 percent to 72 percent. Hundreds of thousands of adults, meanwhile, benefited from a major literacy campaign, launched in May 2001. Millions of literacy booklets were printed and many hundreds of literacy centers were established.

New programs were launched to combat infectious diseases like tuberculosis and HIV, and were so successful that Haiti was one of the first three countries to win grants from the new UN Global Fund for AIDS, TB and malaria. Under the Lavalas administration, says Laura Flynn, "infant mortality declined from 125 deaths per 1000 to 110, and the percentage of underweight newborns dropped from 28 percent to 19 percent."(7)

In the wake of the army's dissolution in 1995, more general respect for basic political freedoms like speech, association and assembly rose to unprecedented levels. The *New York Times* recorded that ordinary Haitians "say they are living without fear for the first time in decades. 'We walk freely,' said Amson Jean-Pierre, 35, an unemployed father of five children who joined a pro-Aristide rally in front of the National Palace. 'We sleep quietly. There are no men who come for us in the night.'"(8)

Significant measures were adopted to limit the widespread exploitation of children, including a 2003 law designed to end the often dramatic abuse of the estimated 400,000 *restaveks* (children sent, mainly from the countryside, to work as unpaid servants in wealthier homes). Breaking from a long and shameful history, under Aristide children began to receive meaningful legal protection. Special children's courts were established, and a dedicated child protection unit was attached to the national police. Thanks to the creation of the extraordinary child-run station Radio Timoun at the Lafanmi Selavi center for street kids that Aristide founded in the late 1980s, children and children's issues gained access to the public sphere for the first time.(9) Also for the first time, women were named to the posts of prime minister, finance minister and foreign affairs minister, and chief of police, and unprecedented numbers of women were elected to parliament. A new Ministry of Women's Affairs was created in 1995, to coordinate policy on issues like violence against women, pre-natal care, post-natal education, condition of work, and so on.

Pressure of neo-liberal reforms

Haiti is deeply and unavoidably dependent on foreign aid and investment. This means that it is dependent on financial flows and policies designed to turn the country into the sort of place that international investors tend to like - a place with low costs, high yields, few rules and no long-term commitments. In Haiti as in most other heavily exploited parts of the world, international aid is meant to develop a space open to foreign

penetration and manipulation, a place free from intrusive government regulations, a place where people are prepared to work for starvation wages, a place where private property and profits receive well-armed protection but where domestic markets, state assets and public services do not. As several well-documented studies show, the development of such a place has been the explicit goal of the foreign donors (the US, the EU, the IMF and other unaccountable international financial institutions) who have usurped much of Haiti's sovereignty over the past thirty five years.(10)

Since the early 1970s and especially since the mid-1980s, every Haitian government has been constrained, with variable degrees of enthusiasm or reluctance, to adhere to the neo-liberal economic orientation that locals tend to deride as the "American plan" or "death plan." In both theory and practice, the effect of these programs is to undermine the public sector, to do away with institutions and policies that might empower the poor majority, and to consolidate at all levels the grip on the economy of the dominant transnational class. Before trade liberalization began [...] Haiti could meet most of its own food needs; today around half the food that Haitians eat is imported, mostly from the US.

Haiti is confronted, [says Aristide,] with a "choice between death and death: either we enter a global economic system in which we know we cannot survive, or, we refuse, and face death by slow starvation." The only alternative is slowly to open up "some room to maneuver, some open space simply to survive."(11)

Aristide understands as well as anyone that "neo-liberalization is a kind of colonialism," that the "neo-liberal strategy is to weaken the state in order to have the private sector replace it."(12) But acceptance of basic neo-liberal rules is for the time being part of the air that every Haitian politician is obliged to breathe, and the power to change this does not lie within Haiti itself.

Around 70 percent of [the Haitian government's] operating budget (and fully 90 percent of its capital projects budget) comes from foreign aid and loans.(13) Aristide was simply stating the obvious when he recognized that "If the international community is not for us, one thing is sure: we will fail."(14) The fact is that "Haiti's material well being is utterly dependent on the whims of the world economy and the demands of foreign financial organizations."(15) Pending a revolution in first-world priorities, this is a reality that any politician in Haiti is more or less obliged to accept.

Haiti's past - struggle for independence

Recognized as a French territory from the late seventeenth century, by the 1780s Saint-Domingue (as Haiti was then called) had become far and away the most profitable colony in the world. On the eve of the French Revolution it had become the world's single largest producer of coffee and the source for around 75 percent of its sugar.(16) This exceptional productivity was the result of an exceptional cruel plantation economy. "Slaves in Haiti," William Robinson observes, "were kept down by perhaps the most extreme and arbitrary terror known in modern history."(17)

In 1789, tensions between factions of the colonial ruling class led to open conflict and when a massive and well-organized slave rebellion began in August 1791 the regime was unable to cope. Over the next few years, the army of emancipated slaves led by Toussaint L'Ouverture slowly gained control of the colony. In a series of brilliant military campaigns, Toussaint defeated the planters, the Spanish, the British, and his own rivals among the black and mulatto militias. In late 1801 Napoleon dispatched the largest expeditionary force that had ever yet crossed the Atlantic, [intending to] restore slavery. [Napoleon's general] Charles Leclerc told him that only "a war of

extermination" could break his opponent's resistance.(18) After a further year of gruesome fighting the French gave up; [...] Napoleon lost more than 50,000 troops.(19)

As C.L.R. James wrote in his classic account of Haiti's revolution, "for self-sacrifice and heroism, the men, women and children who drove out the French stand second to no fighters for independence in any place or time. And the reason was simple. They had seen at last that without independence they could not maintain their liberty."(20) By late 1803, to the universal astonishment of contemporary observers, the armies led by Toussaint and Jean-Jaques Dessalines had thus broken the chain of colonial slavery. Renamed Haiti, the new (and utterly devastated) country celebrated its independence in January 1804. The mere existence of an independent Haiti was a reproach to the slave-trading nations of Europe, a dangerous example to the slave-owning US, and an inspiration for successive African and Latin American liberation movements. Much of Haiti's subsequent history has been shaped by efforts, both internal and external, to stifle the implications of this event and to preserve the essential legacy of slavery and colonialism.

France only re-established the trade and diplomatic relations essential to the new country's survival after Haiti agreed, in 1825 (and under the watchful gaze of the entire French Atlantic fleet), to pay its old colonial master a "compensation" of some 150 million francs for the loss of its slaves - an amount roughly equivalent to the French annual budget at the time.

Though the French demand was eventually cut from 150 to 90 million francs, by the end of the nineteenth century Haiti's payments to France still consumed 80 percent of the national budget. France received the last instalment in 1947. No other single factor played so important a role in establishing Haiti as a systematically indebted country,

[The United States under Woodrow Wilson launched a raid on Haiti in 1915.] The US occupation lasted for nearly twenty years, and it helped to shape the course of much of Haiti's subsequent political history. The American military regime [...] abolished an "undemocratic" clause in the constitution that had barred foreigners from owning property in Haiti, took over the National Bank, [...] expropriated land to create new plantations, and trained a brutal military force designed to fight against one and only one enemy - Haiti's own domestic population. By the time they pulled out in 1934, US troops had gone a long way to discouraging peasant resistance to what was only the first of repeated doses of such imported "modernization," killing anywhere between 15,000 and 30,000 people in the process.(21)

It was both to counter and then to complement the influence of the [US trained] army that the amateur anthropologist and country-doctor François Duvalier organized his own murderous militia, the *Tontons Macoutes*, after winning a rigged presidential election in 1957. For the next fourteen years as "Papa Doc" declared himself the divine incarnation of the Haitian nation, his Macoutes and his *chefs de sections* held the country in an iron grip. Perhaps 50,000 people were killed.(22) Initially wary of his *voudouiste* nationalism, the US soon embraced Duvalier's staunchly anti-communist regime. When François Duvalier died in 1971, his son Jean-François ("Baby Doc") was declared Haiti's new President for Life and enjoyed still more enthusiastic US support, in exchange for providing the sort of investment climate his patrons had come to expect. In the mid-1980s these measures were supplemented by the beginnings of the structural adjustment that would soon reduce Haiti's public sector to a bare-boned shell while stripping its markets of protective tariffs. There were just seven foreign firms in the light assembly sector in 1967; twelve years later there were 51, and by 1986 there were over 300 US corporations working in Haiti. In order for the US/IMF's structural adjustment plan for Haiti to

work properly, however, its authors required a government capable of managing its unavoidable social effects. By the mid-1980s the Duvalier regime could no longer provide the international community with the kind of security it required. [In Haiti] resistance to Duvalier's predatory thugs grew steadily over the 1980s, nurtured by small, informal organizations - *organisations populaires* (OPs) - which emerged to defend their communities and to help arrange some of the basic social services that the state was unwilling or unable to provide. Many hundreds of these vibrant organizations developed in tandem with new community-based church groups, the *ti legliz* - groups which, via the inspirations of liberation theology, began in the late 1970s to break with the traditional conservatism of the Catholic Church. Charismatic priests like Father Antoine Adrien, Father Jean-Marie Vincent, Father Jean Bertrande Aristide, and Bishop Willy Romélus openly denounced the regime and demanded social justice. Millions of Haitian people rallied to their call. Crucially, so did some sections of Haiti's liberal elite - exiled politicians, journalists, academic, entrepreneurs, students. Leading members of the army also came to share the conclusion already reached by the US embassy, the Church hierarchy and the business community: Jean-François Duvalier had become more of a liability than an asset.

The army finally decided to cut its losses and to return the country to direct military rule. After tolerating a brief wave of popular reprisals against a few of the most hated Macoutes in the immediate aftermath of Duvalier's departure the army quickly turned back to business as usual.(23) To preserve the status quo and the privileges of the elite, the mobilization of the people would have to be countered by the ongoing remobilization of an army [...]. More than anything else, what happened in Haiti during the tumultuous years between 1986 and 2001 [perhaps 700 to 1,000 dead under General Namphy and General Avril] (24) is the progressive clarification of this basic antagonism - *Titid ou lame*. Aristide or the army. If in 1986-87 Father Jean-Bertrande Aristide emerged as the leading figure in the popular mobilization it is because he understood this antagonism as clearly as other members of the *peuple* themselves [... and] because he managed to combine a concrete strategy for acquiring practical political power with the uncompromising inspiration of liberation theology.

Liberation theology is entirely organised around the active self-liberation of the oppressed; grounded in a refusal to tolerate the scandalous "iniquity" of poverty and injustice, it "emerges as the strategy of the poor themselves, confident in themselves and in their instruments of struggle."(25) As Noam Chomsky points out, liberation theology marked "a very significant change in modern history. For most of its history, the Catholic church had been the church of the wealthy, the church of the oppressors. There was a very dramatic change in the 1960s and the 1970s, when large segments of the church committed themselves to working for the needs and interests of the vast majority of the population who are impoverished and suffering, and living in semi-slavery. And that had big effects, it led to very significant organizing efforts, led by people of real nobility."(26)

[Aristide was elected President in December 1990. In September 1991 General Cédras and police chief Michel François overthrew Aristide; over the next few years several thousands of Aristide's supporters were killed. US soldiers occupied Haiti for the second time in September 1994. Aristide returned from exile in October of that year and disbanded the army in early 1995. (27)]

Haiti's current struggle for independence in context of aid
In early 1995, Clinton's Deputy Secretary of State Strobe Talbot

explained his government's basic strategy: "Even after our [military] exit in February 1996 we will remain in charge by means of the USAID and the private sector."(28)

Few things are more urgently needed for a better understanding of contemporary Haitian politics than a detailed analysis of the precise economic and ideological role of the non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that now play such a big part in the administration of the country. There are *a lot* of NGOs in Haiti. According to several estimates, there are more NGOs per capita in Haiti than anywhere in the world. In 1998, the World Bank guessed that there are anything between 10,000 and 20,000 NGOs working in the country.(29) Something like 80 percent of public services (the provision of water, health care, education, sanitation, food distribution . . .) are undertaken by NGOs; the largest organisations have budgets bigger than those of their corresponding government departments.(30)

The mainstream press has a ready explanation for the recent growth in NGO funding. "The United States is Haiti's largest donor," observed a *Washington Post* editorial in January 2004, "and to ensure that assistance gets to those Haitians most in need, it is channeled principally through nongovernmental organizations."(31) No further explanation is required. There is another reason, though, why the vast majority of aid money flows through non-governmental rather than governmental organizations: it's easier that way for the people giving the money to take it back. USAID itself "boasts that 84 cents of every dollar of its funding in Haiti goes back to the US in the form of salaries, supplies, consultant fees, and services."(32) The international donors set strict political and economic conditions for the charity they provide. Only a tiny fraction (perhaps five percent of the total) of aid money is aimed where it is most needed - towards a lasting reinvigoration of Haitian agriculture and the rural economy.(33)

[A further] problem with many NGO programs is that they tend to disrupt and then disempower the lives of the people they are supposed to support. Many programs are run on a short-term basis, and provide relatively well-paid but temporary employment. This has the perverse effect of luring farmers and agricultural workers away from their fields, thereby reducing the amount of food harvested, of land cultivated and of time spent on the collective work projects (*kombits*) which are integral to the rural economy; when the development scheme then comes to an end there is nothing to take up the slack, and the ex-employees are soon worse off than before.(34)

As a rule, NGOs do not provide resources to strengthen government initiatives like the Fanmi Lavalas literacy program of 2001-2003, let alone to help empower or organize a militant popular movement. They prefer to help look after the ill, the orphaned, or the under-nourished. While such services are indeed urgently needed, the way that they are provided reinforces the prevailing balance of political power. Wealthy nations have an obvious interest in preserving the image of poorer nations as "failed states" that need generous outside help to survive, just as the charities have an interest in preserving the structural conditions of Haitian poverty, while raising money to alleviate a few of its most unsightly effects.

Fanmi Lavalas

"Alone we are weak, together we are strong; all together we are Lavalas, the flood [*yon sèl nou fèb, ansanm nou fò, ansanm ansanm nou se Lavalas*]. Let the flood descend, the flood of poor peasants and poor soldiers, the flood of the poor jobless multitudes [. . .]" - Jean-Bertrande Aristide.(35)

Ramilus Bolivar (a rural activist) [explains]: "Fanmi Lavalas is the only political organization that has ever tried systematically to formulate and implement the people's demands, and to do this

in direct confrontation with Haiti's old imperial enemies. This is why I'd guess that around 75 percent of the peasantry still support Fanmi Lavalas."(36) On the model of the *ti legliz* and the OPs before it, Fanmi Lavalas [FL] draws its power from the many hundreds of local *cellules* or *ti fanmis*, small groups of dedicated, grassroots militants.[...] FL is by far the most inclusive and participative of Haitian political organizations. Its organization is cohesive enough to win a national election, but elastic enough to stretch over a diffuse network of semi-autonomous groups. Each neighbourhood or district has its own informal committee whose members meet regularly to discuss local issues, engage with the local problems, maintain the integrity of the local organization, and agree on feedback to be communicated to the wider regional cell.

By 2000 Aristide's Fanmi Lavalas organization could present itself as Haiti's natural party of government. Ordinary Haitian people were beginning to get a sense of their collective political strength. In May 2000 they won overwhelming and unprecedented majorities in both houses of parliament and at all levels of government, gaining on average more than 75 percent of the vote. Haiti's mobilization [explains Patrick Elie] had proved that "the poorest people in the hemisphere can know more about democracy than the people who are pretending to be the beacons of civilization."(37) If Haitian elections were run according to a first-past-the-post system like those used in the US or the UK then in May 2000 Fanmi Lavalas would have won more than 95 percent of the seats in both houses of parliament. According to Charles Arthur - one of FL's most forceful critics - FL won these elections because it was the only party to propose a detailed and "coherent political program" (improvements in infrastructure, health and education, investment in micro-financing and peasant cooperatives) and to wage an active campaign based on the "mobilizing efforts of young party activists across the country."(38)

More than its concrete achievements, perhaps the most important reason why a majority of the Haitian poor remains sympathetic to Lavalas in general and to Aristide in particular is the fact that, despite its limitations and mistakes, they could affirm them as vehicles for their *own* empowerment. Aristide's approach is affirmative and egalitarian, based on the self-evident but explosive principle that *tout moun se moun*. Everyone counts as one, every person is endowed with the same essential dignity. That Aristide prefers to assert this principle in primarily theological terms is an indication of its unconditional quality, not of its dependence on any sort of supernatural domain. What he calls "God" is simply a name for an uncompromising commitment to equality and justice. "There is no force superior to humankind" and "There is no Messiah other than the people"(39) It is "better not to believe than to believe in a miracle from heaven." The only sort of miracle that Aristide is prepared to accept occurs when collectively "women and men take control of their own future."(40) Such is the lesson that Aristide retains from Paulo Freire and Leonardo Boff: "The essential point is that the poor themselves should be the actors."(41)

Popular support for Aristide is anything but passive. Much of this support has for more than two decades now been channeled through the informal but resilient network of (OPs). In a country in which state services are so weak and intermittent, OPs provide an instrument for all kinds of social programs - schooling, construction, youth projects, cultural projects, sports and athletic facilities, street cleaning and waste management, and so on. Fanmi Lavalas is the main obstacle to the elite's political agenda. More than any other political organization or institution, it stands in the way of elite attempts to turn the clock back, to undo the revolution of 1990. Rather than Aristide per se it was this

organization's enduring strength in the poorer neighbourhoods that was the real target of pro-coup forces in and after 2004. Presented by George Bush, Jacques Chirac and Paul Martin as a "new day for democracy" in Haiti, in reality the coup that removed Aristide in 2004 marked the beginning of one of the most violent and disastrous periods in recent Haitian history. The repression that followed the second coup was almost as intense as that which followed the first (and on a par, in several respects, with that which accompanied the coup in Chile in 1973). The coup of 2004 did not simply disrupt the Lavalas organisation and kill thousands of its supporters. It was also intended to complete a task that began back in 1991: the task of reversing Lavalas' achievements and of inverting their significance.

Conclusion

The following is part of Peter Hallward's 2006 interview with Jean-Bertrande Aristide:

PH: *And now, at this point, after all of these long years of struggle, and after the setbacks of these last years, what is your general assessment of the situation? Are you discouraged? Hopeful?*

JBA: No I'm not discouraged. You teach philosophy, so let me couch my answer in philosophical terms. You know that we can think the category of *being* either in terms of potential or act, en *puissance ou en acte*. This is a familiar Aristotelian distinction: being can be potential or actual. So long as it remains potential, you cannot touch it or confirm it. But it *is*, nonetheless, it exists. The collective consciousness of the Haitian people, their mobilization for democracy, these things they may not have been fully actualized but they exist, they are real. This what sustains me. I am sustained by this collective potential, the power of this collective potential being [*cet être collectif en puissance*]. This power has not yet been actualized, it has not yet been enacted in the building of enough schools, of more hospitals, more opportunities, but these things will come. The power is real and it is what animates the way forward.

MEETINGS

On Friday the 21st and Saturday the 22nd of October meetings will be held at The Exchange gallery in Penzance at 1pm and 5pm on both days. All are welcome. The meetings are an opportunity for informal discussion of the issues raised in this pamphlet in relation to our support for the people of Haiti. If this pamphlet has been of interest to you please come along so that we can talk about it.

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More information, endnotes, further reading and the complete references/quotations from the book that were used in the article are on this web site - http://ewire.co.uk/the_power_is_real.html

This pamphlet is Adam Burton's contribution to -

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