

# Toward a Second Haitian Revolution

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*We should never forget the damage done and the lives lost, but we have a chance to do things better than we once did.—Bill Clinton and George W. Bush, "A Helping Hand for Haiti," New York Times, January 17, 2010*

Before the cathedral caved in and the palace collapsed, before tens of thousands of bodies filled common graves in Port-au-Prince, before almost half of the population migrated to cities and slums such as Cité Soleil, where families starved within sight of imported rice, Haiti was a political and ecological disaster. During the past decade, development banks, including the World Bank, pledged billions of dollars in aid, money that disappeared into the slums like sea foam in sand. Seventy percent of the population still cannot find steady work; 80 percent live in poverty. As Haiti mourns the victims of its most recent calamity, economists recommit themselves to rescuing it without understanding how Haiti's past has structured its present. They talk about exports and foreign direct investment, all leading to a rise in gross domestic product. They repeat the same story over and over, as though to convince themselves of its happy ending. But "to do things better," as the former presidents implore, would require that we do them differently. A policy more likely to improve the lives of millions can be found where no one is looking for it: in Haiti's agrarian history, in its ruined countryside.

Haiti's agony began with its success. As a plantation colony, it was the richest in the hemisphere. Beginning in the seventeenth century, the planters of French St. Domingue—the island's western third—amassed land and labor, producing coffee, sugar, and cotton with slaves they brought over from West Africa. The plantation regime crumbled in 1791, when the slaves stunned and terrified the American and European elite by enacting the most radical principles of the Enlightenment. They grabbed whips and hot irons out of the hands of their overseers, hanged their colonial overlords, fought off a British invasion, and defeated Napoleon's army of occupation before declaring independence in 1804. No subjugated people had ever so upended the social order, and no one who had profited from that order ever forgave them. "The Haitian Revolution thus entered history," writes the anthropologist Michel-Rolph Trouillot, "with the peculiar characteristic of being unthinkable even as it happened." Just as unthinkable, the free people of Haiti nullified the material basis of the plantation economy. Land reform has rarely delivered on its promise to level social classes, but it came close in Haiti. The constitution prevented any white person from owning land, and although a mulatto elite wanted the great estates for themselves, President Alexandre Pétion moved swiftly to carve up the plantations and redistribute the land for small farms, known as provision grounds.

Under slavery, planters had demanded that Africans practice self-sufficiency as a way of lowering production costs, a policy that taught slaves all the techniques of peasant farming. As

free people, Haitians used the same volcanic soils and abundant rainfall to cultivate the same cassava, dasheen, breadfruit, yams, and rice.

In the decades that followed, smallholders produced a robust subsistence that even yielded small surpluses. An English Quaker and abolitionist named John Candler visited the island during the 1840s and saw families tending farms of from nine to thirty acres, raising yams, plantains, bananas, and coffee. “Good land may be had of the government in every part of the island at a low price,” Candler discovered, “and any man not satisfied with his condition . . . may easily buy it, and become a freeholder in his own right.” He described a busy peasantry free of tribute to any prince, and with “few wants” beyond their common food and coarse clothing. He observed people who “work to live . . . but they do not, and they will not work hard to please anybody.” Candler declared the farms shabby, the cultivation unsophisticated, and the commerce stagnant, all signs that Haitians created no wealth. But he still came away an admirer. One out of every three house-holds possessed its own patchy garden, “a proportion of independent proprietors, such as perhaps scarcely any other country in the world can exhibit.”

Revolutionary Haiti stood on a contradiction. Agrarian households pursue stability, not wealth; sufficiency, not taxable income. But Haiti’s unaccountable peasantry was ruled over by a mulatto elite, who wanted revenue to purchase the trappings of nationhood. Political economists of the era disdained smallholders, arguing that the only way to modernize them was to separate them from their land, giving them no other option but wage work. To Haitian peasants, wage work looked suspiciously like slavery—both monopolized the body of the laborer for someone else’s profit on someone else’s land. Yet export commodities and the money they generated required plantations. Without them, the government lacked the income to fund a military or build an infrastructure.

France, for its part, refused to let go of its brutalized colony. Turning to economic pressure, Charles X demanded that the former slaves compensate their former tormentors by paying out 150 million francs. The Haitians had no choice; the country would never have survived another invasion. The burden Haiti accepted in 1825 debilitated successive governments for more than a century, setting off a spiral of debt as millions of francs were borrowed from French, German, and American banks to make payments. Even after France reduced the balance to 60 million francs in 1838, the debt reparations left Haiti politically explosive, institutionally de-formed, and financially enfeebled—sickly and insecure in its isolation, a nation of free blacks in a sea of white-dominated colonies, many of which refused to trade with it or even recognize it as sovereign.<sup>1</sup> Lingerin debt, more than anything else, forced Haitian society into the political machinations of the Atlantic world and brought poverty and starvation to the once-proud peasantry.

When Haiti struggled to pay its loans, the bankers moved in. A financial syndicate formed the National Bank of Haiti and intimidated the government into giving it a fifty-year monopoly over the currency. Americans owned 20 percent of the venture. Haitians screamed, attacked the government, launched revolutions, and assassinated one president after another. The government found it impossible to meet its expenses, but the foreign-owned National Bank refused to pay interest or inflate the currency until Haiti paid down its debt. Violence ripped through the capital, and word spread to the bankers that government soldiers were about to seize the vault.

In response, on December 17, 1914, U.S. Marines landed at Port-au-Prince, marched into the National Bank, and confiscated \$500,000 worth of gold. Woodrow Wilson ordered an invasion

the following year. U.S. military commanders set the date for the presidential election, placed marines with bayonets inside the National Assembly to intimidate members into voting in a puppet candidate, and declared martial law to stop the protest that followed. Then the State Department issued a treaty—which the new president signed without modification, the pen all but handed to him by uniformed officers—that forced broad terms for the “efficient development” of Haiti’s “agricultural, mineral and commercial resources.” The constitution (written by Assistant Secretary of the Navy Franklin D. Roosevelt) eliminated the prohibition against white ownership. When the National Assembly spit on the occupiers’ law, the occupiers ordered the president to dissolve the Assembly. Commanders then rigged a plebiscite in 1918 to give the constitution popular support. The election ended Haitian independence.

Every polity shapes an ecology, its own land-use regime. The Haitian state emerged from occupation a predatory organization that proceeded to ignite a furious ecological implosion. It invested nothing in the countryside and conserved none of its resources; instead, it turned to graft and smuggling. The French had deforested much of the country during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries by planting every acre they could in sugarcane. The remaining scraps of forest eventually fell, becoming firewood and charcoal for a proliferating peasantry. The rural population multiplied, and whereas that increase would have signified a flourishing subsistence culture in a larger country with richer resources, on a small, mountainous island it undercut the foundation of peasant autonomy. Only 28 percent of Haiti is arable. Increases in population density often spur households to raise more food in a limited area by redoubling their labor. But that is not what happened in Haiti. Making room for additional households diminished the area available for safe subsistence. Their resources pulled out from under them, peasants clung to their homesteads even as their old strategies failed them. Those who could last no longer migrated to Port-au-Prince and their final destination, a tin-and-cardboard shack on stilts over an open sewer.

They joined, that is, the global migration to les bidonvilles —the slums. For most of the people who have moved to the world’s cities during the past fifty years, relocation has not brought improved diet, education, health care, or environment. Instead, it has created such places as Cité Soleil in Port-au-Prince, and Dharavi in Bombay, and Neza (Ciudad Nezahualcōyotl) in Mexico City. Ten thousand people lived in Neza in 1957; 3 million live there now. The slums have heaved and thickened in the past three decades, accounting for 33 percent of all the city-dwelling people on earth, a population of 1 billion, a seventh of all humankind.

Now the bankers have come back to Haiti, in the form of the International Monetary Fund, whose twenty-five-year rescue attempt seems to have been designed to drown the victim. In 1986, under pressure from the IMF, Haiti again opened its finances and its fragile peace to outsiders, who treated it as a social-science laboratory. With the regime of Jean-Claude Duvalier in ashes and Haiti again descending into violence, the IMF floated less than \$25 million, for which tiny sum (and a promise of more) it demanded changes. Haiti was forced to cut its public spending. It would cease all support to its domestic rice farmers, withhold credit, and invest even less than it had in roads and the decaying irrigation systems.<sup>2</sup> Most important, the government would open its neighbourhood markets to imports, known to Haitians as “Miami” rice.

Riceland Foods of Stuttgart, Arkansas, now imports most of the rice eaten in the country. Miami rice costs less than home grown, but consumers pay a high price for it in other ways. Haitian rice farmers fail even when they try to adapt to global competition. High-yield “Green Revolution” seeds offer larger harvests for greater profit at prevailing prices, but they trade resilience for

abundance, requiring more pesticide and fertilizer than do local varieties. And farmers cannot select the next year's seed from what they harvest. The seed companies breed out the plant's ability to germinate in the second generation, forcing farmers to purchase seed year after year. This added cost burdens households that already operate inside very narrow cash margins, sometimes with little more than three acres under till. Finding it impossible to compete with industrial agriculture, the smallholders have over time moved to les bidonvilles, where they become lifelong customers of Riceland.

In 2008, a spike in food prices provoked the world's poor to riot against the governments of Haiti, Guinea, Mauritania, Mexico, Morocco, Senegal, Uzbekistan, and Yemen. Haitians lined up for rations and filled their bellies with fine silt mixed with water, shortening, and salt, shaped into discs and set out to harden in the morning sun. Dirt eating in Haiti stems from a craving not for any trace minerals the eaters may ingest but for the sheer mass in the gut. As one woman said to a journalist, "Once you eat [the biscuits], you don't feel hungry anymore. That and a glass of water and you feel satisfied." To supplement the clay cakes, children compete with pigs for the gleanings along open sewers. "No one talks about the sugar," said a furious woman in a public market. "No one talks about the corn, the beans, and the oil. No one talks about the education for the kids. No one cares about what we go through."

In the logic of economic development, land that feeds people is under-employed, freeholder sufficiency is poverty, and independence from wage work is backwardness. People once called isolated and unproductive now starve from being integrated and un-employed. They starve, in other words, from the very dependency that represents their modernity. These millions of Haitians—the great-great-grand-children of the slaves who instructed the luminaries of the European Enlightenment on the meaning of liberty, the great-grandchildren of the proud smallholders whose cassava and dasheen gave material meaning to that freedom—grind earth between their teeth.

Helping Haiti now requires us to recognize that development aid has been little more than a monetary shakedown, "developing" nothing but millions of additional units of misery and dispossession. It has punished modest, small-scale farmers as though they were part of a problem when in fact they represent the only viable solution. Provision grounds elsewhere in the Caribbean have undergone no significant decline for centuries, evidence of the reliability of low-input cropping practices. Farms on this model maintain their soils, function without petroleum or capital, and give returns that feed local markets. As for their supposed isolation from the world economy, the studies of anthropologists obliterate this misconception. Smallholders around the world sell into the global marketplace without surrendering their autonomy.

Haiti's peasants are the only people in the nation's history who have ever produced for domestic consumption. Progress for Haitians means invigorating the countryside under their ownership, their cultivation, their control; it means helping the government help its smallholders. This is the low-impact, antidevelopment solution for Haiti's future: a program of land re-form that would give the provision grounds back to households, allowing them first to sustain themselves and then to create surpluses. The elite now own large, unproductive estates throughout the countryside. The challenge of development must be to make that land socially as well as economically productive. As for the food supply, imports will be necessary, but exports will follow when Haitians begin to meet their own critical needs.

There are places where subsistence cultures still thrive: for example, on Mount Kilimanjaro in Tanzania; around Port Moresby in Papua New Guinea; in the mountains of Kalimantan, Indonesia; in Nigeria and Java, Cuba and Uganda. (Yes, they include some whose governments no one would want Haiti to emulate, but household farming exists in the shadow of government.) Of Uganda's 32 million people, 24 million—or 75 percent—work their own gardens. In 2007 Uganda's commercial and house-hold farmers harvested 9.2 million tons of plantain, 4.4 million tons of cassava, 2.6 million tons of sweet potatoes, 615,000 tons of bananas, 732,000 tons of millet, 1.3 million tons of maize, and hundreds of thousands of tons of sorghum, beans, and potatoes. Through the 1980s, a remarkable 44 percent of Ugandan GDP came from outside the money economy, and more than 90 percent of these exchanges involved household agriculture. Tewolde Egziabher, general manager of Ethiopia's Environmental Protection Authority, says that "Africa's subsistence agriculture could be the basis for the much-needed intensification of sustainable food production, not only in Africa but through-out the world."

Capitalists have hated the agrarian household since the seventeenth century, calling its members savages, outliers, slackers and draggers, backward and degenerate, and wasteful of land and labor—at best curiosities, at worst forest- or mountain-dwelling insurgents without political allegiances or ties to centralized authority. The agrarian household so perplexed and infuriated its critics because it seemed to deny historical progress. It was not in a process of becoming something else. Rethinking our assumptions about development, and allowing subsistence cultures to produce for exchange on their own terms, would give Haiti a chance to recover the best part of its history and to stun the world again with the genius of its freedom.

**This article and much more information on Haiti available on the website of the Canada Haiti Action Network: [www.canadahaitiaction.ca](http://www.canadahaitiaction.ca).**

Notes by editors:

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<sup>1</sup> The last payment of the Independence Debt was in 1883, according to Laurent Dubois, 'Haiti: The Aftershocks of History' (2012).

<sup>2</sup> Marc Cohen, lead researcher at Oxfam America, writes in January 2012, "Indeed, food imports increased significantly during the 1980s in light of rapid urbanization (which in turn stemmed from failure to invest in agricultural development). However, prior to Aristide's return from exile (1994), Haiti still had a 50% tariff on imported rice, which fell to 3% (virtually zero) upon his return due to U.S. and international financial institution pressure. That compares to 20% in the Dominican Republic and an average of 38% for CARICOM.