

# JustComment

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## Haiti: fed on dependency, starved of independence

"Haiti was more than the New World's second oldest republic ... more than even the first black republic of the modern world. Haiti was the first *free* nation of *free* men to arise within, and in resistance to, the emerging constellation of Western European empire."

Ira Lowenthal, anthropologist

### Background

Haiti has been on display following a shocking earthquake. The world saw its belly torn open, bodies lined up on streets, survivors wailing in unimaginable grief<sup>1</sup>, and desperate people labeled 'looters'. Poverty and unpreparedness for this earthquake are not just facts of life: they have a history of causes – where human ill-will has played a major role.

Christopher Columbus claimed the island (then named it Hispaniola) for Spain in 1492. 200 years later Hispaniola was divided: the east (now the Dominican Republic) was controlled by Spain; the west was ceded to France which began by developing coffee and sugar plantations. Hundreds of thousands of people were 'imported' from Africa as slaves to work on the plantations over the next century. Conditions were appalling and many were literally worked to death. With such low labour costs, the owners soon grew fat on the profits. The sweet smell of revolution in France in 1789 made its way to its Caribbean colony and in

1791 the slaves revolted. The French unable to suppress the rebellion as slaves outnumbered their masters by ten to one finally left in 1805. Haiti is the only nation to gain independence by a slave-led rebellion. But not for long. The French came back 20 years later with gunboats to demand reparations of 150 million francs (about \$US21 billion today) for the loss of its economic and human property. This crushing debt, though later reduced, was not paid off until 1947. Haiti was never allowed to be politically or economically independent<sup>2</sup>. Haiti capitulated to the extortion marking the beginning of a long history of haemorrhage. The debt was only settled in 1947. In order to survive they were forced to borrow from money at enormous rates from American, French and German banks.<sup>3</sup>

### Further Misery

Between 1843 and 1915 Haiti had 22 heads of state. In 1915, the USA invaded allegedly to restore 'stability' following the murder of President Guillaume Sam and they remained in control for 19 years. Haitians opposed this presence despite some improvements made by the Americans to the infrastructure. It needs to be born in mind that in the same period the USA invaded Nicaragua, Cuba and Honduras. Every attempt at self-government was thwarted.

Political coups and natural disasters have plagued the country. In 1957,



Francois (Papa Doc) Duvalier, a doctor and union leader, as elected president oversaw a regime, notorious for corruption, torture and terrorism. The USA, in the logic of the Cold War, supported this repressive regime in order to keep the Soviets out. Duvalier was succeeded by his 19 year old son, Jean-Claude (Baby Doc) Duvalier. The continued repression forced many of its educated people into exile. In 1986, the U.S. helped oust Jean-Claude Duvalier<sup>4</sup>. In 1994, Father Jean-Bertrand Aristide was elected president and one of his initiatives was to demand that France return the extorted money which he calculated to be \$21.7 billion including 179 years of compound interest. In 2004, the USA helped to abduct this democratically and popularly elected and president.<sup>5</sup> Haiti was actually robbed of democracy by two US-aided coups against Jean Bertrand Aristide. He is still denied a passport and forbidden to return to Haiti<sup>6</sup>.

There have been calls against the IMF imposing detrimental economic policy

conditions on Haiti such as the privatisation of public services, which undermine democratic governance and economic well-being<sup>7</sup>. IMF and World Bank have aggravated what the people call the 'development of underdevelopment'. Free trade has destroyed agricultural production which contributed to a food crisis and growing a sweatshop economy. Farmers were forced to move to Port-au-Prince to seek work. Though international financial institutions will most likely never get back the capital, their creditor role will permit them to still control the government's economic policies.<sup>8</sup>

Haiti needs genuine allies. It does not need to be occupied under the cover of aid. Just over a week after the earthquake it was evident that the initial phase of the US-led relief operation conformed to three tendencies that have shaped Haiti's recent history. The USA adopted military priorities and strategies. It sidelined Haiti's leaders and government, and ignored the needs of the majority. And the USA proceeded to reinforce the already harrowing gap between the rich and the poor. These three tendencies are not only connected but mutually reinforcing. These tendencies will continue to govern the reconstruction effort unless determined political action is taken to counteract them.<sup>9</sup>

Haiti has been robbed of its food, money and popular government. The 'looters' come from the colonial West that has never wanted a free Haiti, whose history consists of subjugation, revolution and further subjugation. The USA and France have profited from the 'three-cornered trade in sugar, manufactured goods and slaves' themselves. In the name of free trade, US neo-liberal policies ruined Haitian agriculture when forced to lower its own tariffs that protected its rice growers. US subsidised rice flooded the market forcing mass migration of small farmers to Port au Prince, further

**I hate the way they portray us in the media. You see a black family, it says 'They're looting. You see a white family, it says, 'They're looking for food'.**

**A rapper condemning media portrayal of Black people**

adding to the overcrowded slums which made the earthquake so much more devastating.<sup>10</sup> The 'looters' are still coming from outside Haiti's fragile borders.

**What can be done?**

Haiti – exploited and broken – above all needs allies and a bailout.<sup>11</sup>

**Cancel the debts:**

Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez has recognised Venezuela's historical debt to Haiti for providing assistance to Simón Bolívar, who led Venezuela's war of independence. He has cancelled Haiti's \$295 million debt to Petrocaribe, Venezuela's energy regional energy distributor. There is a growing movement to cancel Haiti's foreign debt as a way to return to the Haitian people the authority to rebuild their lives and their country. Among these are the New Evangelical Partnership for the Common Good<sup>12</sup> and Jubilee USA.<sup>13 14</sup> A petition of 150,000 signatures has been sent to the International Monetary Fund (IMF) calling for the cancellation of Haiti's \$165 million debt repayment obligation for debt cancellation to the World Economic Summit meeting in Davos.

**Support food producers:**

There are many worthwhile suggestions that respond to the problems rather than neoliberal economic recipes. This can be achieved by increasing their access to:

- land, by supporting a comprehensive land-reform program designed to transfer quality, arable land to small farmers;
- appropriate technology and training;
- infrastructure improvements, particularly irrigation and roads;
- soil restoration and reforestation

- programs to improve soil fertility;
- food storage and marketing support.<sup>15</sup>

**Allow Haitians to order their affairs:**

There have been calls to allow Aristide to return to Haiti and that the ban on his Fanmi Lavalas party be lifted. Haiti needs to be rid of the U.S. and U.N. military occupation that has once again snuck into their country and to cut dependency ties with Washington, the European Union, and others. 'People-to-people solidarity' where the people themselves can help in the reconstruction rather than foreign domination. Desperate Haitians do not need US military or UN 'peacekeepers' pointing guns at them. On the way to ordering their own affairs, we should demand that France start repaying the \$21 billion it extorted from Haiti in 1825, to 'compensate' for loss of Haiti as a slave colony.<sup>16</sup> It would seem that Haiti could do with a trade policy that develops, rather than undermines, labour rights, environmental standards, and food sovereignty. Government policy would need to privilege human need for all over profit for the few. It is important that a space be created for women's full participation and power.

**If you shared my pain you would not continue to make me suffer, to torture me, to deny me my dignity and my rights, especially my rights to self-determination and self-expression<sup>17</sup>**

Haiti does not need more guns and weapons. It needs help in order to rebuild and be enabled to have genuine independence. Till now its history is a 'historical disaster'.<sup>18</sup> International interventions must break with past patterns to avoid the ongoing historical disaster and end the misery due to a history of irresponsible aid policies.<sup>19</sup> The earthquake aid response cannot be hampered by a country such as the USA which has never wanted or accepted Haitian self-rule – something that is again evident as so-called 'security concerns' were prioritised over urgent, life-and-death needs.

Full set of resources and references are on the ERC website [www.erc.org.au](http://www.erc.org.au)



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