

BOOK REVIEW ESSAY

Overpowered: Control and Contingence in Haiti

Matthew J. Smith

University of the West Indies, Mona, JM
matthew.smith@uwimona.edu.jm

This essay reviews the following works:

Contrary Destinies: A Century of America's Occupation, Deoccupation, and Reoccupation of Haiti. By Léon Pamphile. Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 2015. Pp. xviii + 203. ISBN: 9780813061023.

Politics and Power in Haiti. Edited by Kate Quinn and Paul Sutton. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013. Pp. xi + 202. ISBN: 9781137311993.

Haiti: Trapped in the Outer Periphery. By Robert Fatton Jr. Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2014. Pp. ix + 227. ISBN: 9781626370364.

Charlemagne Peralte was already a known figure in his country when he issued one of the most resolute defenses of Haitian nationalism. Aged thirty-two, a general of a band of rebels based in the countryside, he wrote a letter to René Delage, the French foreign minister in Haiti, in which he explained the motives for his protest: "We are prepared to make any sacrifice to liberate Haitian territory."¹ One hundred signatories affixed their names below his. The year was 1919. Peralte had ascended to the leadership of a peasant alliance popularly called Cacos but reviled by their foreign adversaries as "bandits." Their cause was the return of political control to Haitians four years after the United States government had claimed it. "American troops by virtue of their own laws," Peralte maintained, "have no right to wage war against us." The war he wrote of reached its apogee in 1919. Peralte had witnessed its violent extremes but he would not witness its end. By November he was dead. Herman H. Hanneken, a United States Marine acting with the aid of Haitian allies, infiltrated Peralte's camp and carried out the assassination. The sense of loss that followed Peralte's murder was palpable not only among his followers but also those sympathetic with their mission. One member of the Cacos close to Peralte seized upon the larger meaning of his death. "All at once my hopes and those of my comrades collapsed. The Americans would not be chased away."²

What happened next is well known to people familiar with Haitian history. The United States defeated the rebels and continued its occupation of the republic until 1934. Peralte became a martyr for Haitian struggles against foreign domination. When the occupation ended he was given a state funeral and the image of his corpse, half-naked and cruciform, is now an iconic symbol of nationalism recognized by generations of Haitians.

Peralte's spirit hovers over Haiti because the cause he fought for has yet to be won. After the destruction of the Cacos a century ago and the deoccupation of Haiti, the Americans have still not been chased away. Their presence has deepened and strengthened across the century since the occupation began. The possibilities for change in Haiti have been stymied repeatedly because of a series of catastrophes whose pernicious effects have to varying degrees been encouraged by US impositions.

¹ This letter is included in Charlemagne Peralte to Delage, Camp Général, July 27, 1919, enclosure to René Delage to minister of foreign affairs, Port-au-Prince, August 8, 1919, dossier 9, Haiti 1918–1940, Archives Diplomatiques, Ministère des Affaires Étrangères, Paris; it is cited and discussed by Alan McPherson in *The Invaded: How Latin Americans and Their Allies Fought and Ended U.S. Occupations* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 62, 228 n. 28. My translation of the document is taken from "Bandits or Patriots?: Documents from Charlemagne Peralte," *History Matters: The U.S. Survey Course on the web*, <http://historymatters.gmu.edu/d/4946/> (accessed June 15, 2016). Information in this paragraph is taken from this source.

² Quoted in Laurent Dubois, *Haiti: The Aftershocks of History* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2012), 261.

This argument was once denied but is more frequently made these days, thanks to a more critical scholarship that has sensitized readers to the powerful disjuncture between rhetoric and practice in US diplomacy. Haiti was one of the earliest countries in its hemisphere to be occupied by the United States. It was also one of the longest occupations, and the effect of repeated US interference has been overwhelmingly negative.³

Causality can be difficult to prove. Events, both predictable and unforeseen, have outcomes that depend on the contexts in which they were actuated. Yet tracing the causes of Haiti's present dilemma is precisely the complex task undertaken in the three volumes on Haitian political history under review in this essay. Collectively these works show that Haiti has been subjected to a long series of occurrences of such startling gravity that their repetition must be attributed to the failures of *all* those who have wielded power over the country, be they foreign or national.

The study of twentieth-century Haiti is in many ways an exploration of the abuse of power, its manifestations, motivations, and the cycles of misfortunes it has wrought. Too often the arc of Haitian history bends in a direction governed by outside forces that have been complicit in the country's distress. Predetermination is balanced by the unexpected: the rise of the dictatorship of François "Papa Doc" Duvalier in September 1957, the destructiveness of the earthquake of January 12, 2010. The ability to advance meaningful improvement out of tragedy is possible only when those who marshal power subordinate their interests to national goals. Why this has been the exception rather than the rule in Haiti is a question that scholars of modern Haiti have long pondered.

Consider the conceptual argument presented by Léon Pamphile in his recent book, *Contrary Destinies*. Pamphile's subject is the difficult relationship between Haiti and the United States since Haitian independence in 1804. He argues that the United States has been exploitative in its conduct with Haiti, paying little regard to what is best for Haiti. "America's interests running contrary to Haiti's interests have contributed immensely to the political and socioeconomic demise of the Haitian people" (xvi). Pamphile's book is a brisk survey of the long-entwined relationship between the two oldest republics in the Americas. He finds in the US occupation the basis of all that would come to haunt Haiti well into the next century. After Peralte's death and the disabling of armed resistance, the United States has remained the superior power in Haiti. There have been authoritarian presidents, but there has been no return to the violently combative political dynamic of the nineteenth century. Instead most of Haiti's leaders, in spite of their control of the state, ultimately remain answerable to the United States. Pamphile makes the point concisely: "Since the first occupation of 1915, Haiti has remained virtually under American control" (156).

This claim is unsurprising given the weight of critical studies of the US occupation and its long-term effects since the pioneering work done by Roger Gaillard (*Les blancs débarquent*), Hans Schmidt (*The United States Occupation of Haiti*), and Brenda Gayle Plummer (*Haiti and the Great Powers*). The important question that Pamphile's book sets out to answer, though, is how we might explain the endurance of United States power after 1934 despite Haitian awareness of its deleterious effects. He devotes two chapters to the decades that followed. He argues that Haiti's leaders were willing surrogates to Washington's designs for the country after the occupation. Sténio Vincent, elected in a wave of nationalist protest in 1930, previously had been a fervent opponent of occupation, who, once in power, absorbed the directives of the United States into his rule. Élie Lescot, president from 1941 to 1946, "epitomized the highest level of American control in Haiti." (53). Lescot's successor, Dumarsais Estimé (in office 1946–1950) has been treated more favorably by historians for his insistence on a renewal of Haitian national identity. Yet he could offer no lasting alternative to US control despite the triumphalism of his economic program of 1947, a repayment of US loans made in 1922. The state's inability to develop a sustainable counterpoint to US hegemony not only undermined the administration but also assured US dominance. This situation contributed to a reinvigorated Americanism. Even as local politics of the 1940s devolved into conflict, the contending parties vied for US endorsement of their candidacies, understanding fully that without it they stood no chance of victory.

³ The literature on the US occupation has grown considerably over the past thirty years. This work has added nuance to interpretations of US intervention in Haiti and its results. Where the earliest chroniclers—many of whom were marines themselves—defended US actions, the weight of the evidence presented in the scholarship indicates that the occupation had deleterious effects for Haiti and its relationship with the United States. Some examples of works that make this point include Jeffrey Sommers, with contributions by Patrick Delices, *Race, Reality, and Realpolitik: Haiti-U.S. Relations in the Lead Up to the 1915 Occupation* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2016); Alex Dupuy, *Haiti, from Revolutionary Slaves to Powerless Citizens: Essays on the Politics and Economics of Underdevelopment, 1804–2013* (New York: Routledge, 2014); Mary A. Renda, *Taking Haiti: Military Occupation and the Culture of U.S. Imperialism, 1915–1940* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001); Brenda Gayle Plummer, *The United States and Haiti: The Psychological Moment* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2003); and J. Michael Dash, *Haiti and the United States: National Stereotypes and the Literary Imagination*, 2nd ed. (London: Palgrave, 1997).

In his penultimate chapter, the “Americanization of Haiti,” Pamphile discusses the intensity of US cultural hegemony in Haiti carried further by an active US presence there through nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), the United Nations Stabilization Mission in Haiti (MINUSTAH), and the ties linking the expansive Haitian diaspora in the United States to relatives at home. The neoliberal policies that have been imposed on Haiti since the 1980s have applied extraordinary pressure on a fragile economy and kept Haiti tied to a never-ending cycle of debt. Altogether, Americanization has, Pamphile argues, “taken place at the cultural, educational, religious, political, and economic levels” at a faster rate over the past two decades (136).

Pamphile makes the most of his evidence in the later sections of the book. His principal primary sources are diplomatic dispatches and newspapers. Since there has been a fair amount of academic interest in these areas, he draws liberally from secondary material in developing his synthesis. This allows him to sketch out the Cold War context that determined the nature of the preponderant influence of the United States in the Caribbean region after the 1940s and strengthened its command of Haitian politics. Much of his focus remains at the level of the state. The influence of this determinative relationship on Haitian social development is, on balance, less developed. Still, what we learn of the state’s response is important. Haiti’s feeble leadership found few options to US control by mid-century and so acquiesced. Haitians of all classes understood this powerlessness, more obvious with the spread of US commerce and might in the postwar world.

By then the weakness of the Haitian state in the face of expanding United States dominance had become a defense in itself. For Haiti’s elite politicians there was a great deal of capital to be gained from ascribing blame to the United States. It could be used to camouflage social inequalities and maintain a local system of corruption and graft that was more deeply rooted in Haitian soil than US interference. This is a point too frequently overlooked.

A story from 1954, recounted in a leading newspaper at the time though apocryphal in tone, illustrates the exaggerated condemnation of the United States for Haiti’s woes. A visitor from Jamaica to Haiti in 1954 asked a Haitian colleague why there were fewer trees along the promenade in Port-au-Prince than in Kingston. The responder faulted the Americans, who had purposefully cut down the trees to deny Haitians shade. US abuse of Haiti was, the visitor concluded, “the great alibi for all national ills.”⁴

Closer attention to the interstitial line between power and possibility hinted at in this anecdote draws attention to a different sociopolitical optic through which the exercise of power in Haiti can be interrogated. Some of the best work done on Haiti has concentrated more fully on the interdependency between social class and political culture in Haiti. David Nicholls’s classic 1979 study *From Dessalines to Duvalier* introduced a provocative analysis of Haitian discourses of power.⁵ The book has had a transformative effect on how we debate Haiti’s political relations and its ties with the United States.

Duvalier’s dictatorship represented an anomaly in Haitian politics. The brutally authoritarian Duvalier managed to stay in office until his death in 1971. By that time he had engineered the continuity of his ideas by transferring control of the state to his teenage son, Jean-Claude. Nicholls found explanation for this unusual experience of dynastic rule in twentieth-century Haiti not far below the surface of Haiti’s past. If one were to cast a clear-sighted view of the past, the antecedents of Duvalierism could be found, especially in the fraught social context that intensified after the US Marines exited.

The principal contribution of Nicholls’s work was its insistence on the conflict-ridden social dimensions of Haitian life that he argued were determinative in how Haitian political history unfolded. The Haitian political class was for much of its history divided between light-skinned and dark-skinned politicians, each proclaiming their legitimacy of rule. The division was so intense that this class undermined Haitian independence by opening the possibility for foreign control. Thus the US occupation, while a clear example of United States belligerence, was conditioned by the failure of the political class to share and protect power.

The insightful essays collected by Kate Quinn and Paul Sutton in the anthology *Politics and Power in Haiti* approach Nicholls’s enduring legacy from fresh angles. Several of them engage directly with Nicholls’s work and personality—we learn that he was as insistent about his views in life as in print—and others take elements of his arguments into territory he never explored. Millery Polyné, for example, examines Haiti’s connections with African Americans during the Duvalier years with a study of the community of Haitian exiles in New York.

Alex Dupuy offers the most direct challenge to Nicholls’s interpretation. Dupuy’s essay closely inspects Nicholls’s arguments and questions their usefulness in making sense of post-Duvalier Haiti. Dupuy’s

⁴ Gabriel Coulthard, “Haiti: Sad Country of Many Problems,” *Haiti Sun*, September 19, 1954, 6.

⁵ David Nicholls, *From Dessalines to Duvalier: Race, Colour, and National Independence in Haiti*, rev. ed. (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1996).

disagreement with Nicholls is a matter of degree. Although Dupuy acknowledges the worth of color and class—the foundations of Nicholls’s thesis—as explanations of Haitian reality, he finds their relevance overstated particularly for the period after 1986 when Jean-Claude was overthrown. This was a point Nicholls himself allowed in the revised 1996 edition of *From Dessalines to Duvalier*. Dupuy is naturally able to examine the dynamics of post-1986 Haitian politics much further than Nicholls, who died in 1996. Instead of color, Dupuy finds that “the language of rights, justice, and equality, in short of democracy, decisively displaced that of identity and pigmentation and its prescriptions as a claim to power” (57). Those who claimed to rule Haiti did so not based on legitimacy of color, as did Duvalier, and Estimé before him, in the 1940s and 1950s. Instead, they had to assert their commitment to democratic values above all else. The coming to power of Jean-Bertrand Aristide in 1990 was predicated on this fact. “Aristide’s most significant contribution,” Dupuy asserts, “has been to remove the veil of color in the political discourse to unmask the fundamental class interests of both factions of the dominant class and their international allies” (57). Thus the objectives of both spheres of political authority in twentieth century Haiti, the United States and the Haitian political elite, were reconciled in a manner that denied the very rights of the poor majority that the elites claimed to serve.

Quinn and Sutton best summarize the way political power is deployed in Haiti in their introduction to the book. They credit Nicholls with forcing a discussion on the operationalization of political rule after the collapse of the state, a process determined by two simultaneous dialectics. “There are twin forces at work in Haitian political history: the internal dialectic of mulatto and black and the external dialectic of foreign intervention and foreign withdrawal, which are at the same time independent of each other and also very closely interlinked” (10).

This is a keen assessment of how struggles for power and control play out in Haiti. The authors recognize that “separating the origins and terminal points of each is indeed a complex problem” as it demands of scholars a heightened sensitivity to contexts shaped by time and custom. The challenge is increased by the strength of the legacies both have etched on Haiti. Each decade bears its own palimpsest of repression and abuse. No domain is left unmarked.

Take Michael Dash’s contemplative essay on the intellectual Jean Price-Mars’s early twentieth-century concept of Haitian *bovarysme*—the “borrowed fantasies” of a self-absorbed elite. Price-Mars’s work, especially his books *La vocation de l’élite* (1919) and *Ainsi parla l’oncle* (1928), shattered this cultural myopia and led to the birth of the indigenous movement of the 1920s and its most recognizable offspring, *noirisme*, a shorthand for Haitian black power.⁶ In the 1960s *noirisme* was transmogrified into Duvalierism in the rhetoric of the dictatorship to justify its violence. Yet, as Dash reveals, the original idea not only served as a weapon in the contest for political rule but also as a calcified theory that ignored Haiti’s “American” presence in the broadest sense of the term.

The corruption of the cultural space by Duvalier’s generation has led later writers such as Dany Laferrière to champion a more worldly approach for Haiti, as Dash emphasizes. The uprooting of Duvalierism is not only about the physical and symbolic remains of its violence but also the interpretations of history it left behind. As Dash concludes, “If the ghosts of Duvalierist discourse haunt the present unending transition from the politics of Duvalierism, it is because the idea of authenticity has not been exorcised from the Haitian imaginary” (39).

The search for an alternative to this abuse of cultural nationalist ideas in Haiti is confounded by the weightier challenge of the residue of Duvalier’s suffocating apparatus of repression. Patrick Sylvain in his essay refers to the Haitian government under Duvalier as a “macoutized state” in which independent voice was constantly overwhelmed by state forces. This discourse retains relevance in Haiti of the twenty-first century because “the macoutized state was never fully de-Duvalierized and the post-Duvalier governments never achieved full legitimacy” (86). It is for this reason, Sylvain maintains, that Jean-Claude Duvalier could return in 2011 to Haiti, where he would live out the remaining three years of his life. The state, at a notably weak moment, was unable to enforce punishment on Duvalier for his regime’s human rights abuses. More than this, Sylvain claims that a “neo-Duvalierism” has emerged in Haiti in which the strong man rule of the dictatorship is more appealing than the fragile democracy that the country has sought to build over the past thirty years.

The specter of a troubled political history is all the more distressing when confronted by unprecedented and radical disturbance. The earthquake of 2010, when measured by the sheer scale of human and systemic

⁶ Jean Price-Mars, *La vocation de l’élite* (Port-au-Prince: Imprimerie Edmond Chenet, 1919), and *Ainsi parla l’oncle* (New York: Parapsychology Foundation, 1928).

loss, was for Haiti an event of unparalleled destruction. Scholars have over the past half-decade been grappling with ways to process what this presents for twenty-first-century Haiti as it has brought into sharp relief the historical questions that have colored Haiti's power struggles.

The papers in *Politics and Power in Haiti* began life as presentations at a conference in London held in the summer of 2010. The earthquake occupies an appropriately significant place in the volume as it did at the conference. Reginald Dumas, former special adviser to Haiti for the United Nations secretary-general in 2004, delivered the keynote address at the conference. A revision of Dumas's address closes the volume and is focused on the initial response to the earthquake by foreign and regional donors and companies. Dumas echoes a view widely held at the time that in the midst of the disaster there existed a unique opportunity for Haiti to be completely restructured. With committed regional and international support Haiti could "rise before too long from the rubble of its adversity" (181). Dumas's assessment was not without caution. He was well aware that if the promised donations of Western countries and the recasting of Haitian politics in light of a massive tragedy did not materialize, the ugly aspects of the past would resurface and the conventional methods of control would strengthen.

Paul Sutton's sober postscript elaborates on this point. Written after the disappointments with post-2010 assistance, his is a terse assessment of what is truly possible and not simply imaginable. As Sutton concludes, "The problems, in short, are massive and the actors, individually and collectively, so far incapable of asserting any real change. . . . A solution to the multiple problems of Haiti is still not within grasp and if it is to be found a necessary starting point will be the political" (190).

And yet the political domain itself is so profoundly defective that even this cheerless conclusion is reliant on a range of improbable factors. The window for improvement following the disaster could not stay open for long. Power slipped from the hands of the Haitian ruling class, rent and devoid of solutions. The emboldened external forces filled the vacuum now with an enlarged role in Haitian politics. Any intention to repair the state structure was mired under the privileging of external objectives over local ones, inflicting greater wounds on the country and its people, a tragedy within a tragedy. The control of the Haitian national airport by the United States immediately after the earthquake was a demonstration of the low command of the Haitian government. The weight of the dispirited outcome since 2010 is so heavy that anything contrary seems unfathomable.

Such is the conclusion one gets from political scientist Robert Fatton Jr.'s unremitting take on post-earthquake Haiti, *Haiti: Trapped in the Outer Periphery*. Fatton's outer periphery is a "zone of catastrophe and suffering" (169). It has been placed and kept in this station by a conspiracy between the Haitian state and the "International," Fatton's term for the outside powers that dominate. To state that Fatton takes the least hopeful view of things is to observe only his evidence. The more apposite evaluation of his work would be to engage with the arguments he presents, which suggest that time and change are not determinants of success in Haitian politics. Deprived of functioning systems of governance for centuries, Haiti is constrained to move within externally imposed parameters. Haiti's "zero-sum" politics—a point Fatton developed in his earlier *Haiti's Predatory Republic: The Unending Transition to Democracy*—ensures that even with the passage of time and the destabilization of 2010, expectations for improvement were unrealistic given the history of the players involved. On the first two years after the earthquake, Fatton writes, "I have attempted to show that every key development over the past two years . . . reflects Haiti's confinement to the outer periphery of the world capitalist economy as an export-oriented enclave of ultra cheap labor. . . . This confinement is the result of the neoliberal programs that the IFI's and the core's apparatus of occupation has imposed with the complicity of Haitian rulers on the crisis-ridden nation for over three decades" (123).

But why have Haiti's rulers, beneficiaries of the painful lessons of their predecessors, not demanded an end to the control of the "International" led by the United States? Outsiders may regard the country as a "failed state" existing, as Fatton reminds us, "in a failed world economy," but it is certainly dangerous for new generations of Haiti's political class to share this view (59). In the final chapter of his book, Fatton offers one possible answer to this question with a review of the confused politics of 2010–2013. Not a year after the catastrophe, a national election campaign was organized to find a successor to President René Préval (in power 2006–2011), whose tenure had expired. The entire enterprise was flawed. "It was an election that should never have taken place," Fatton concludes (4). The outcome was the rise of Michel Martelly, a "bad boy" pop singer who had never held political office or had any record of national service. Martelly's profile was not the only result of the election that raised concern. Only 4.3 percent of the potential voters cast ballots in an election under the total control of the United States. This indicates the strong disapproval of the majority of Haitians with the political process. It is clear that the slow process of democracy building still has a long way to go before the nation believes it can be incorporated in a system that was structured to exclude

them. Martelly's victory, as Fatton reveals in his detailed discussion of the election, ensured that Martelly would enjoy the support of the International. Martelly embraced their paradigm, declaring Haiti "open for business" in his inaugural address and doing whatever the international forces bade him to. It was the IHRC (Interim Haiti Recovery Commission) led by President Bill Clinton, and not the president's office, that was the effective decision-making body in this early phase.

Compromised and inexperienced, the new government was unable to fulfill Haitian expectations. The situation was complicated by Martelly's near-constant conflict with a Parliament resentful of his choices and style of leadership. Yet again the ruptures of internal power struggles widened. Amid attempts at restoration, Haiti's politics was made more difficult by urgent problems of narco-trafficking, kidnapping, and corruption. These were "wasted years," according to Fatton, in which state capacity was weakened and the "International" and their agents, principally well-meaning yet unknowing aid agencies and NGOs, maintained a privileged position. Fatton's chronicling of the obscene waste and frustrating misdirection during this period is one of the book's strengths. Haitians grew increasingly more disappointed with the failures of the government and within a year began to protest against the government. In the protests against the state in 2012, Fatton, writing in 2014, finds a signal of future difficulties. Indeed the political impasse of the 2015–2016 elections seems to support his view that Haiti "is entering a new era of discontent" (167). Martelly has completed his term, but the strains that have marked the road to the election of his successor have injured Haitian democracy.

All three books contemplate the wider context of the earthquake. They also end on a shared note of despair. They do not stay there. In their expression of a common wish for a better future for Haiti the authors return to the past. In doing so they move beyond the occupation and the resignation that the Americans cannot be chased away. They go to the birth of Haiti in 1804 and the triumph of the revolutionaries who forced out the foreign powers that had exploited and enslaved them, a moment when Haitians made their own history. Hope, that omnipresent word which holds a permanent place in optimistic conclusions about Haiti, rolls as easily off the pen as it does the lips. Pamphile's closing words identify Haitians as a "proud people still inspired by their heroic independence. . . . To keep alive the hope of a better Haiti, Haitians must rally around [a] vision of an ideal nation" (158). That such an objective relies on a complex of other variables needs no repeating.

What 1804 achieved was an annihilation of a powerfully oppressive system that was so complete that the system had no chance of regeneration. The present system of control in Haiti, long in its formation, will require incredible effort if it is to be dismantled. How this can be done is just as unknown to present actors and observers as the possibility of an independent Haiti in the early nineteenth century. As a final consequence, the forces reliant on the abusive methods of the past will have to be exhausted of their power before Haiti can make its own future.

Author Information

Matthew J. Smith is professor of Caribbean history and chair of the Department of History and Archaeology, University of the West Indies, Mona. His area of research is Haitian political and social history. His publications include *Red and Black in Haiti: Radicalism, Conflict, and Political Change, 1934–1957* (2009) and *Liberty, Fraternity, Exile: Haiti and Jamaica after Emancipation* (2014).

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