



# Haiti: Symbolism and Scapegoating in the Americas

By Tracey Nicholls



What is happening in Haiti right now?

Another president. More allegations of corruption at the highest levels. More riots in the streets. More foreigners wringing their hands publicly as they privately feed on the carcass of this once (and potentially future) prosperous part of the world. Haiti is still - as it has been for most of the last 215 years - the cliché summed up in a unitary phrase typically used to describe it in news reports: the-poorest-country-in-the-Western-hemisphere.

A recent episode of Al Jazeera's news and social media show *The Stream* took up the question of whether change is possible, whether Haiti might have a future that is better than its past. One of the commentators on this question observed that the popular protests against Haiti's current president, Jovenel Moïse, had been peaceful for the previous eighteen months and had only now turned violent. The discussion went on to note that violence is a way for people to make their voices heard, echoing the injunction attributed to American president John F. Kennedy that "those who make peaceful revolution impossible will make violent revolution inevitable".

For long-time watchers of the nation's politics, it is clear that what is happening in Haiti now is a consequence of the fact that the voices of the Haitian people have never been listened to, never been

taken seriously, by those who have the power to clear away the obstacles that prevent people from making their lives better.

Following the current events and politics of this troubled nation easily breeds despair in those of us who watch from afar. The names change, but the misery remains a constant reality. The impulse to turn away is understandable. It is also wrong, and misguided, for at least two reasons. First, because turning away from suffering is immoral, inhumane. Second, because Haiti is not a singular case; it is an illustration of the dangers and difficulties that must be faced by any nation wishing to chart a free and independent future for itself and its people.

### **Vulture capitalists**

Once upon a time, Haiti was a French colony known as Saint Domingue. It produced the sugar and coffee wealth that propped up the pre-Revolution *ancien régime*. Back then, too, foreigners flooded in to enrich themselves, but in those days the adventurers some now call “vulture capitalists” fed on a body that had plenty of meat on its bones.

That unchallenged feeding frenzy ended when news of the French Revolution and the 1789 Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen passed by a new republican parliament in France arrived in the colony. This declaration asserted, among other things, that all Frenchmen had a right to liberty, and was a harbinger of the 1794 abolition of slavery in France. Inspired by the declaration’s guarantees, the Africans of Saint Domingue, who had been kidnapped from their homes and sold at auctions to be viciously and ruthlessly worked to death as they produced France’s sugar and coffee wealth, became the world’s first and only example of slaves who rose up and freed themselves.

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The path to liberty and the transformation of Saint Domingue into the new nation of Haiti was neither easy nor entirely successful. It is this “not entirely realised” nature of Haiti’s revolution that provides the instructive lesson for all decolonising polities.

The birth of this new nation – an inspiration to all those who have followed in the long struggle to break the shackles of colonialism – was marked by failures to fully achieve both political and economic sovereignty. The economic consequences of the brutal 13-year-long war the former slaves fought against one of the great military powers of Europe were devastated infrastructure and the collapse of their sugar and coffee exports. Politically, the initial decades were characterised by diplomatic isolation, largely due to European belief that Haiti’s independence was an aberration, and that France would eventually reassert control over its wayward colony.

France had acquired from Spain, and at that time still held, the eastern side of the island of Hispaniola (the territory that is today the neighbouring nation of the Dominican Republic) so re-invasion by French forces was a real threat faced by the emergent nation. By 1825, however, the restored French crown was manoeuvring for monetary compensation and indemnity, for their “lost assets” – the land, and the slaves who had freed themselves—rather than reconquest.

Haiti agreed to the indemnity and the bank loans to finance the indemnity payments in the hope that French recognition would translate into diplomatic relations and economic opportunity – a move that

drained the country's coffers of precious tax revenues and foreign currency reserves all the way through until the final payment on related loans was made in 1947. These payments amounted to 122 years of economic parasitism that are valued in current US dollars at approximately \$21 billion.

### **A toxic political tradition**

The men who emerged as the revolution's generals and leaders, first, Toussaint L'Ouverture, and then, Jean-Jacques Dessalines, were both committed to continuing the plantation economy required for the former colony's sugar production despite overwhelming support of the population for a "cultivateur" economy of small-scale coffee farms and other self-sustaining agricultural operations.

In the waning days of the revolution, as independence was increasingly seen as possible, then likely, Toussaint declared himself Governor-General for Life, inaugurating a toxic political tradition of authoritarian rule that continues to plague Haiti. Dessalines, the general who inherited his leadership mantle after Toussaint was captured and imprisoned by the French, continued to rule as a military dictator, first declaring himself Governor-General (following Toussaint's example), then Emperor of Haiti (in a move thought to be modelled on Napoleon Bonaparte's example in France).

Dessalines was the leader who proclaimed both the initial declaration of Haitian independence and its remarkable *Imperial Constitution of Haiti, 1805*, but his growing unpopularity led to his defeat almost immediately after independence, upon which the nation was divided into a northern kingdom and a southern republic for most of the first two decades of its existence.

In the northern Kingdom of Haiti, Henri Christophe continued the Toussaint-Dessalines policy of trying to impose an authoritarian military regime and an export-based plantation economy. His rival in the southern Republic of Haiti, Alexandre Pétion, only partially cut against this orthodoxy. Trying to develop a new economic model, Pétion broke up the large plantations into smaller parcels and instituted a "sharecropping" system, while simultaneously reforming taxation policy to collect revenues from imports and exports rather than internal economic transactions. However, he also embraced political authoritarianism.

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The nation was reunified after Christophe's death in 1820 by Pétion's successor, Jean-Pierre Boyer, but the model for Haitian governance for most of its subsequent history was set: authoritarian rule that ranged from being unresponsive to the population's needs to being openly and brutally corrupt.

It was not until 1874 that Haiti had a leader, Jean-Nicolas Nissage Saget, who served his term as president and then retired voluntarily. Nissage Saget, however, had come into office as the result of a coup, so the first truly successful transfer of power from one popularly elected president to another would have to wait until 2001 when René Préal handed the office over to Jean-Bertrand Aristide.

### **The destructive role of Haiti's powerful neighbour**

While all of this external exploitation and internal mismanagement (political and economic) was taking place, Haiti's most powerful neighbour, the United States, was jockeying for geopolitical

advantage. Happy to trade with the colony and with the emerging nation in its early days, the United States nonetheless wanted to discourage further European expansion in the Americas (a position that later became known as the Monroe Doctrine) even as it sought opportunities to acquire territorial possessions from France and Spain.

One manifestation of this was the economic embargo on Haiti by the US from 1806 on, in collusion with France and Spain. Haiti's American neighbour had in fact profited handsomely from the French defeat in the Haitian Revolution; in financially desperate circumstances partly attributable to the revolution, France negotiated the Louisiana Purchase of 1803, a transfer of lands around the Gulf of Mexico which, at the time, doubled the territory of the young United States.

American antipathy towards Haiti was not just about doing business with the Europeans - for example, currying further favour with the French in order to gain control over Florida; it was also driven by racist pro-slavery factions who could not tolerate the idea of a nation of self-liberated former slaves next door. For all of these reasons, the United States gave Haiti no diplomatic recognition until 1862, halfway through the US Civil War (when the Southern racists, having formed their own break-away government, were no longer in the national legislature).

Since this recognition, however, the United States has militarily occupied Haiti (from 1915 to 1934), propped up brutal dictatorships (supporting the vicious Duvaliers, for instance, as a bulwark against Fidel Castro's Communist Cuba), and colluded in removing popularly-elected president Jean-Bertrand Aristide from power (twice). It is almost too obvious and too inadequate to make the same point about Haiti that former Mexican leader Porfirio Diaz (1830-1915) made of his own country: "Poor Mexico, so far from God, so close to the United States!"

### **Unapologetic blackness: Haiti's "new man"**

The remarkable 1805 *Imperial Constitution of Haiti* that I alluded to above is an example of the promise that Haiti is still struggling to realise. Dessalines promulgated Haiti's independence on January 1, 1804, calling on all "native citizens: men, women, girls and children" to defend and take pride in the country of "our birth". He backed up that declaration with a radical re-thinking of racial hierarchy in the 1805 constitution. Article 14 of the *Imperial Constitution of Haiti* reads: "[a]ll distinctions of color will by necessity disappear...[and] Haitians shall be known from now on by the generic denomination of blacks.."

It is, I think, worth noting that the basis on which attempts have been made to build solidarity has changed over the years; the post-Duvalier 1987 constitution (that in fact *re-constitutes* Haiti as a democratic state) attempts to unite Haitians through designating Creole as the country's common language rather than through assignment of a political "race.". But, in a hostile and racist world, the 1805 claim that Haitian national identity would be synonymous with blackness can be read as a fundamental (hence, radical) challenge - a compelling attempt to decolonise the mind - and stands as one of the most crucial contributions that the Haitian Revolution has made to progressive struggles around rhetoric and representation.

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Arguably, it is a precursor to the non-racial conception of Algerian nationhood that Frantz Fanon celebrated in *A Dying Colonialism* (published in French as *L'An Cinq, de la Révolution Algérienne*, 1959). Where the Algerian conception of national unity ("Every individual living in Algeria is an

Algerian”) was empowering because it recognised citizenship and national belonging as a matter of nominal membership in a category (one chooses to name oneself as belonging, therefore one belongs) and a matter of personal choice, rather than postulating some definitive essence that one must possess in order to qualify as a citizen of the new nation, the first Haitian constitution of 1805 sought national unity through disruption of racial categories and hierarchies. The bold declaration of what today we would call “unapologetic blackness” put Haiti at the forefront of the movement towards human liberation.

So is Haiti where we find the “patient zero” of Frantz Fanon’s new man? Perhaps. Fanon tells us – principally and most directly in *The Wretched of the Earth* (*Les Damnés de la Terre*, 1961) but implicitly in all his writings – that it is decolonisation that brings forth his new man, the liberated, agentic human being who recognises the moral value of all human lives and does not allow others to compromise or restrict his (or her) ability to live fully and freely in this world that is his (or her) birthright.

We can certainly see approximations of this ideal in some of the more stirring actions and rhetoric of those we now remember as the architects of the Haitian Revolution, Toussaint and Dessalines, in particular. It is the voice of Fanon’s new man that promulgates the radical rejection of racial hierarchy in the 1805 constitution, and it is the new man who was speaking when Toussaint reproached as futile his capture by the French. “In overthrowing me, only the trunk of the tree of liberty has been cut down,” he is reported to have said. “Its branches will shoot up again, for its roots are numerous and deep.”

Yet another story in anti-war activist Stan Goff’s post ‘The Haitian Intifada’ on his now defunct blog *The Feral Scholar*, presents Dessalines in the guise of Fanon’s new man. Goff tells the story of Dessalines’s response to French demands that he surrender: Dessalines replied to them that the Haitian people “would turn the island to ashes before they would accept the reimposition of slavery” and, to show that he meant what he said, he reportedly picked up a torch and set fire to his own house. (American podcaster Mike Duncan tells a version of this story that attributes the uncompromising response and the house-burning to Henri Christophe, not to Dessalines, but the point remains.)

But Toussaint L’Ouverture, Jean-Jacques Dessalines, and Henri Christophe were, as I have noted, all committed to continuing the plantation economy of the former colony. This required authoritarian, hierarchical rule, and forced labour for the masses, arguably a betrayal of the ideals for which the self-liberated people of Haiti had proven themselves to be willing to live and die by. I would argue that Haiti’s first leaders only fitfully embodied Fanon’s new man; he (she) was born in the masses and struggles still to survive.

Duncan, who produces a fascinating podcast series (10 seasons and counting) about political revolutions that have shaped the modern world, devotes season four to the Haitian Revolution. Despite mangling (by his own admission) many of the French and Haitian names of the people and places involved in this revolution, he pulls off the impressive task of telling a reasonably balanced history of the birth and fitful life of this nation that he styles “the avengers of the new world.”. He concludes the 19-episode season by observing:

*Today, Haiti is, as everyone is contractually obligated to point out when talking about Haiti, the poorest country in the western hemisphere. They got there through the mix of the world screwing them over a lot, their own political and economic mistakes, and then environmental catastrophes caused both by God and their own hands. But they will never not be the country that was born from the only successful slave uprising in the history of the world ... they had been created by a group of men and women who would not be slaves anymore, who beat back*

*every major world power who tried to come in and tell them how it was going to be. The history of Haiti is not pretty, and Haiti is not in great shape right now. But I'm proud to know them, proud to know their history.*

There is yet another story worth knowing in order to assess what respect and what honour we owe to the people of Haiti. In the colony of Saint Domingue, one French delicacy of choice at fine dinners was said to be pumpkin soup, a delicate strained velouté. One of the decolonising moves of the Haitian people was to create their own pumpkin soup that they now call *joumou*. *Joumou* is not the refined, decadent delicacy the French colonisers sipped; it is a hearty meal full of chunks of meat, bones for flavour, pumpkin, gourd, and any other vegetables one has on hand - anything one can think of to put in a soup will find its way into someone's *joumou*. It is an everyday soup, and an improvisatory one. Many cooks have their own jealously-guarded special recipes and it is a standard - even obligatory - feature on the menu of Haitian restaurants.

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But *joumou* has a deep traditional significance when it is eaten on January 1, the first day of the new year and the anniversary of the day in 1804 that Haiti declared itself a free, independent black republic. On this anniversary, *joumou* is cooked to be shared with family and neighbours in a ritual of hope and solidarity. In Haitian diasporic communities like the one found in Montréal, Haitian restaurants open early in the morning on New Year's Day so that members of the diaspora who do not have the time or cooking facilities to make their own soup (often migrant workers) can eat *joumou* as their own first meal of the year.

As we celebrate another year and all the promise it holds, spare a thought for all the Haitians, at home and in these diasporic communities around the world, who are sharing their *joumou* with each other in the enduring hope that they will find a path to the full realisation of their revolution that reshaped our world.

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