
Tectonic Shifts
Haiti Since the Earthquake

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Haiti's 500-Year Earthquake

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DISASTERS ARE NOT ACCIDENTS OR acts of God.⁸ They are deeply rooted in the social, economic, and environmental history of the societies where they occur. Moreover, disasters are far more than catastrophic events; they are *processes* that unfold through time, and their causes are deeply embedded in societal history. As such, disasters have historical roots, unfolding presents, and potential futures according to the forms of reconstruction. In effect, a disaster is made inevitable by the historically produced pattern of vulnerability, evidenced in the location, infrastructure, sociopolitical structure, production patterns, and ideology that characterize a society. Nowhere is this perspective more validated than in Haiti, which on January 12 in some respects experienced the culmination of its own more than 500-year earthquake.

Like the written histories of many Latin American and Caribbean nations, Haiti's begins in tragedy and devastation. The Taino, the original population of the island later named Hispaniola, were decimated by European diseases contracted from the earliest Spanish settlers in 1493. After fitful attention from the Spaniards and other European powers for more than 125 years, the French West India Company established control over the colony, by then called Saint-Domingue, which constituted about a third of the island. By the end of the seventeenth century, African slavery, a foundational element in the long-term construction of Haiti's vulnerability, was instituted to obtain labor to work on plantation crops of sugar and coffee for export. By the end of the eighteenth century, the colony's African slaves were producing 40% of all the sugar and 60% of all the coffee consumed in Europe, for the benefit of European planters and their offspring with slave concubines, offspring whom the French colonial system often defined as free and able to inherit property and own slaves; many of these *mulâtres* would emerge as Haiti's first national elites.⁹

The revolutionary zeal of 1789 in France spread to these early elite free people of color in Saint-Domingue, initiating a series of reform and resistance movements in 1790 that progressed into full-scale slave revolts and ultimately culminated in the colony's independence in 1804. Haiti, its name chosen from the original Taino name for the island, became the

world's first black republic. Despite the Haitian victory, however, France refused to recognize the new republic until reparations were paid for lost "property," primarily in the form of slaves and land, in the amount of 90 million gold francs (reduced from 150 million). Haiti was subjected to new threats of invasion by France and a crippling embargo maintained by France, Britain, and the United States until it agreed in 1825 to that payment. The entire debt was paid off only in 1947, after Haiti had taken out high-interest loans to do so. Haiti thus began its existence under the weight of crippling debt and embargo. Bearing that burden, the country went from being the richest Caribbean colony, "the pearl of the Antilles," to the most impoverished nation in the Western Hemisphere.¹⁰

To punish the upstart black republic, European and US leaders early in the nineteenth century began a campaign to isolate Haiti politically and economically, essentially channeling through debt obligations the nation's extracted resources—income largely from sugar, coffee, and indigo—toward metropolitan nations, first France and later the United States, following the 1915 US invasion.¹¹ The Haitian government and elites brokered the extraction process with foreign powers, principally the United States, and began accumulating power and wealth while draining the nation's resources. While impoverishing the population with brutality, militarism, mismanagement, and corruption, Haitian elites did little to construct a viable infrastructure or a functional institutional framework in the country.¹²

The historical construction of Haiti's impoverishment and vulnerability has been exponentially compounded by more recent developments during the last quarter of the twentieth century. Following the brutal dictatorship of "Papa Doc" Duvalier, the ruinous reign of his son "Baby Doc" left the nation in even greater debt to foreign lenders because of either misappropriation or outright theft by the dictator. The second Duvalier regime, a virtual kleptocracy, coincided with the catastrophic USAID-ordered slaughter of all of Haiti's pigs to limit the spread of African swine flu virus. The loss of the pig population—the source of peasant savings, emergency capital, and nutrition—left rural people, the majority of the population, even more impoverished and vulnerable.¹³

Ever more bereft of resources, rural Haitians were forced to cut down more and more trees to produce charcoal, eventually deforesting almost all of Haiti's territory. USAID programs, working with large landowners, encouraged the construction of agro-processing facilities, while International Monetary Fund (IMF)-imposed tariff reductions opened Haitian markets to subsidized US rice surpluses, undercutting local production of the nation's staple crop and dismantling the rural economy. The goal of these measures was to develop Haiti's cities into centers of export production for

US companies. The destruction of the rural economy and investment in urban export production stimulated a massive migration to the nation's cities, where impoverished migrants took up residence in festering slums and hillside shantytowns with few services of any sort. The demand for jobs by displaced rural people quickly outstripped the supply, deepening the impoverishment of ever denser populations in vulnerable locations in cities. Political instability during the last 20 years has also led to a reduction of companies available to offer jobs.¹⁴

Thus, as 2010 began, Haiti found itself extraordinarily vulnerable to the natural hazards of its environment. In the previous quarter-century, few development efforts, misguided and mismanaged as they were, had privileged the issue of environmental security or hazard mitigation. A lack of building codes, together with informal settlements, widespread undernourishment and hunger, disease, poor access to clean water or electricity, inadequate educational and health facilities and services at the national and municipal levels, and crime and corruption led to the presence of extreme vulnerability. In addition, Haitians were largely unaware of the seismic risk on the island, although seismologists had been warning of the possibility of a strong earthquake.

Because of this social construction of extreme vulnerability, more than 300,000 Haitians died, according to Haitian government estimates. The unregulated and informal housing stock of the city of Port-au-Prince has been flattened, its basic service lifelines, inadequate as they were, destroyed. A million people now without shelter awaited the summer's torrential rains and the oncoming hurricane season in conditions of extreme exposure and deprivation.

A scant five weeks after the Haitian earthquake, Chile was hit by an earthquake that was more than 500 times more powerful. Nonetheless, because of the epicenter's depth and location farther from densely populated areas, the number of Chileans killed in the quake was limited to hundreds rather than hundreds of thousands, as in Haiti. But the difference in mortality can be traced not only to the location and depth of the earthquakes but also to the levels of vulnerability that characterized the two societies. Because of the frequency and severity of earthquakes in the region, Chile's government and population are sensitized to the need for precautionary measures. For example, Chile has an excellent building code, first instituted in the 1930s and later modernized under the Salvador Allende administration and strengthened again in 1985.¹⁵

In contrast, Haiti has no building code, and the vast majority of the population of its capital, Port-au-Prince, lived in poorly constructed houses in densely packed slums. Moreover, rampant corruption in Haiti virtually

assured that even buildings constructed in the formal sector had little engineering input and substandard construction. The high rates of damage and collapse of formal building stock were clearly a function of corruption among high-level officials, who turned a blind eye to these irresponsible practices that resulted in the total destruction of 13 of 15 federal ministry buildings. Transparency International ranks Haiti at 168 and Chile at 25 in their least-to-most-corrupt index.¹⁶

In terms of development levels, Chile, despite having its share of poverty and inequality, has a much better Human Development Index (HDI) than Haiti. The HDI is a composite index measuring the average achievements of 182 nations in three basic aspects of human development: health (life expectancy at birth), knowledge (adult literacy rate and the combined primary, secondary, and tertiary gross enrollment ratio), and standard of living (GDP per capita). In the 2009 Human Development Report, Chile ranked 44th, well into the high-development category, while Haiti ranked 149th, toward the bottom of the medium-development category and quite close to the low-development category, occupied primarily by African states (23 of 24 listed).¹⁷ These levels of poverty and underdevelopment, while not identical with vulnerability, coincide very frequently with high vulnerability. Such indicators also demonstrate that Chile has a functioning state apparatus that delivers a certain level of service to its citizens, which was evident in the earthquake emergency and aftermath, whereas Haiti's government was virtually invisible, if not nonexistent, for several days after the disaster.

Yet the relationships between citizen and state as evidenced in behavior during the two disasters in Haiti and Chile displayed some significant differences. In the context of the almost total absence of the state in Haiti, the response of the population—apart from some relatively few cases of looting—was characterized by social solidarity and self-organization resulting in collective efforts at rescue and assistance to those in need. Looters in Haiti, meanwhile, were subjected to the rough justice of the community. In contrast, in Chile, with its powerful centralist state apparatus, the population depended largely on government responses. When these did not prove adequate to the situation, individualist impulses took over, unleashing more social violence and looting than in Haiti.

Raúl Sohr, a Chilean journalist, suggests that the lack of social solidarity and organizational capacity in the general population was a result of the corrosive effect of a neoliberal political and ideological model that prompts individualist gain-seeking rather than collective responses to crisis.¹⁸ The contrast between the social responses in Chile and Haiti resonates with findings that resource constraints under neoliberal regimes in Latin

America have eroded previously dense social networks of the poor, reducing community solidarity and interhousehold cooperation.¹⁹ Thus, there may in fact be more to reconstruct in Chile than infrastructure and housing stock. On the other hand, in Haiti, potential social resources on which to base reconstruction may be more abundant than expected.

The fundamental question that needs to be asked is how reconstruction can address the complex of environmental, economic, political, and social variables that produced the Haitian disaster in such a way that will be sustainable, reduce vulnerability, and enable people at the household and community level to survive. In other words, Haiti has to reconstruct and recover economically without reinstituting the same system that generated the extreme vulnerability in the first place. However, predisaster systems, regardless of levels of incompetence and corruption, have shown themselves to be remarkably resilient, very often achieving quite rapid reinstitution in aftermaths. In effect, reconstruction becomes a test of the system's capacity to respond to a clear demonstration that the catastrophic death and destruction that took place in Haiti were deeply rooted in the changes enacted in the country's social and political-economic history, particularly in the twentieth century.

Reconstruction, to be truly transformative, has to address that complex of factors that made the earthquake into the horror that it became. In other words, reconstruction will have to recognize the responsibility of international forces and local interests in the high vulnerability of Haiti, which then must be reflected in policies and practices that address not only the symptoms manifested in the destruction, but also the causes, both proximate and distant, of the disaster. If we view the death and destruction of the Haitian earthquake as due in part to economically and socially inscribed practices and the capital and commodity flows that created and sustained them nationally and internationally, the challenge of reconstruction lies not just in rebuilding Haiti but in changing its marginal place within the world system.

In contemporary disasters, perhaps our most important task is to discover and implement those aspects of reconstruction that within the limits of action permitted by existing structures can feasibly reduce environmental degradation and vulnerability to hazards. Post-earthquake Haiti provides an important opportunity for economic forms and practices to be altered toward more sustainable forms of use. By the same token, the earthquake has created a space in which political power balances can be reassessed and shifted to better reflect local realities and the needs of society.

Furthermore, reconstruction can help to establish the range of possibilities for sustainability as an achievable goal of specific directed policies within the limitations established by current economic practice. However, whether the political and economic structures of the nation can, even with the necessity and the incentive of reconstruction, truly ever come to grips with a set of endemic conditions that are so deeply embedded by both national and international forces in their own forms and practices remains in doubt.

In the final analysis, much of the devastation and misery caused in Haiti by the earthquake of January 12 was a product of historical processes set in motion since the time of independence, and even earlier. These processes, emerging from the international response to the abolition of slavery and the struggle for independence, cumulatively over time, produced the conditions of profound vulnerability in which most of Haiti's population lived. Thus, the accentuated vulnerability that the island nation exhibited before the earthquake, and still exhibits, is a socially created phenomenon—a historical product brought into being and maintained by identifiable forces.

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The Neoliberal Legacy in Haiti

Alex Dupuy

HAITI HAS HAD A LONG history of foreign interference in its domestic affairs since it gained its independence in 1804, culminating in the US invasion and occupation of the country from 1915 to 1934.²⁰ Thenceforth, the United States displaced other powers, notably France, Great Britain, and Germany in the nineteenth century, and placed Haiti firmly under its sphere of influence. For our purposes, however, we can consider the 1970s as having marked a major turning point in creating the conditions that existed on the eve of the earthquake and contributed to its devastating impact.

In return for military and economic aid from the United States and other core countries (notably Canada and France), the regime of Jean-Claude "Baby Doc" Duvalier (1971–1986), which succeeded that of his father, François "Papa Doc" Duvalier (1957–1971), turned over the formulation of economic policy for Haiti to the international financial insti-