



POLICY BRIEF

Chains of the Past: How Colonial Exploitation Shaped Haiti's Political and Humanitarian Crises

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Introduction

The global narratives around colonialism and external interventions have long been shaped by Western-centric viewpoints that celebrate European dominance and exclude the voices of the colonized. This imbalance has erased significant histories, such as that of Haiti, from mainstream global consciousness. Yet, Haiti holds a pivotal place in the world's democratic and decolonial legacy. The Haitian Revolution not only played a transformative role in abolishing slavery in the Americas but also challenged the socio-political and racial hierarchies of its time. Despite its early achievements in liberation and self-determination, Haiti's modern history has been shaped by political instability, external intervention, and structural poverty, much of which can be traced back to the unresolved legacies of colonialism and economic imperialism. This paper critically explores Haiti's journey, tracing its revolutionary beginnings, the impacts of international aid and intervention, and its struggle for sovereignty and self-determination.

The Haitian Revolution and Its Global Legacy

The Haitian Revolution began in August 1791 with a mass uprising of enslaved people in Saint-Domingue and culminated in the declaration of independence on January 1, 1804. It was the first successful slave revolt in modern history, resulting in the establishment of the first Black republic and the first post-colonial state in the Caribbean (Dubois, 2005). The revolution was distinct in that it dismantled a system built entirely on racial exploitation, thus challenging the ideologies of both slavery and European supremacy. Despite its global significance, the revolution is often marginalized by Western historians in mainstream historical discourse. This exclusion is emblematic of a broader issue, which is the historical tendency to glorify Western conquests while ignoring or erasing the agency and resistance of colonized peoples. As such, the Haitian Revolution should not merely be seen as a localized event but as a global milestone in the history of human rights and democracy.

Commented [O11]: Relying solely on Pierre-Louis for this landmark event limits the historiographical breadth. Please look into at least C.L.R. James – *The Black Jacobins*, Michel-Rolph Trouillot – *Silencing the Past*, Laurent Dubois – *Avengers of the New World*

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Economic Colonialism: Reparations and Debt

Haiti's post-independence trajectory was immediately burdened by economic subjugation. In 1825, under the threat of military invasion, France demanded reparations for the loss of its colony and enslaved laborers, forcing Haiti to agree to pay 150 million francs, a sum nearly ten times its annual revenue. To make these payments, Haiti was forced to take loans from French banks, plunging the nation into a cycle of debt that lasted for more than a century (Ramachandran & Walz, 2015).

This unprecedented demand, in which the formerly enslaved paid compensation to their enslavers, underscores the economic injustice embedded in postcolonial global structures. The debt severely restricted Haiti's ability to invest in development, health, and infrastructure, and laid the groundwork for the poverty and inequality that continue to plague the nation today.

Western Interventions and Humanitarian Aid: The Double-Edged Sword

Following the 2010 earthquake that killed over 200,000 people and displaced more than 1.5 million, Haiti became the focus of a global humanitarian response. According to data collected by the Office of the Special Envoy for Haiti, multilaterals and bilaterals had allocated \$13.34 billion to

relief and recovery efforts in Haiti for 2010-2020. Of this, an estimated 48.2 percent (\$6.43 billion) has been disbursed. An additional \$3.06 billion (estimated) was contributed to UN agencies and NGOs by private donors (foundations, companies, individuals). Yet, as Ramachandran and Walz (2015) reveal, little of that money reached the Haitian people. Poor coordination, lack of transparency, and a disproportionate reliance on foreign NGOs meant that aid efforts were more performative than transformative.

Adelman (2011) critiques the Western aid model for assuming that foreign institutions know what is best for Haiti, bypassing local institutions and undercutting the state's capacity. As a result, the Haitian government was sidelined in its own reconstruction process, perpetuating dependency rather than fostering resilience.

The interventionist model also facilitated a new form of imperialism; one based not on territorial control but on economic and developmental manipulation. Foreign governments, international financial institutions, and NGOs operated with little accountability, often reinforcing the very structural inequalities they purported to address.

The Role of the United States and the United Nations

The United States has played a particularly significant role in Haiti's history. From its occupation of the country from 1915 to 1934 to its orchestration of the 1994 intervention to reinstate President Jean-Bertrand Aristide, U.S. involvement has been fraught with contradictions. While promoting democracy, U.S. policies often prioritized geopolitical interests over Haitian sovereignty (Pierre-Louis, 2011).

More recently, the United Nations' presence in Haiti, under the guise of peacekeeping and humanitarian missions, has had complex effects. On the one hand, interventions like the UN Stabilization Mission in Haiti (MINUSTAH) were intended to promote security and rebuild institutions. On the other hand, they were marred by controversy, including the introduction of cholera by UN peacekeepers in 2010, which led to the deaths of over 10,000 Haitians (International Crisis Group, 2021).

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Scholars like Carey (2006) argue that UN interventions have evolved into mechanisms for the enforcement of international human rights regimes. However, the absence of a long-term vision and meaningful engagement with Haitian civil society has undermined these efforts. In many cases, international intervention has functioned as a substitute for domestic political will and capacity, leading to shallow, short-lived reforms.

Non-Intervention's Victory?

Recent years have seen growing skepticism around foreign intervention. Donais (2021) frames this shift as the “triumph of non-intervention,” a cautious move away from liberal interventionism following failures in Haiti and other post-conflict states. This philosophy, while respecting national sovereignty, runs the risk of neglecting urgent humanitarian needs.

Indeed, after the assassination of President Jovenel Moïse in 2021, the international community was hesitant to intervene decisively. Instead, responsibility was outsourced to a Kenyan-led Multinational Security Support mission, which has been criticized for being underfunded and logistically unprepared (International Crisis Group, 2021). The absence of a strong multilateral response has created a power vacuum in which gangs have proliferated, and civilian suffering has increased.

Haitian Agency and the Montana Accord

In contrast to top-down interventions, Haitian-led initiatives offer more sustainable solutions. The Montana Accord, a civil society-driven proposal, seeks to establish a transitional government capable of restoring democratic norms and organizing credible elections. It reflects a broad consensus among Haitian organizations and individuals about the need for local ownership of political processes.

As noted by Katz (2023), such grassroots movements represent a promising departure from externally imposed solutions. However, for these initiatives to succeed, they must receive both moral and material support from the international community, without being co-opted or undermined.

Conclusion

The trajectory of Haiti's past and present is a striking reminder that the chains of colonialism are not merely historical, they are structural, economic, and deeply political. The Haitian Revolution was a radical rupture with a world order built on racialized exploitation, and yet, the centuries that followed only replaced visible chains with financial ones. From France's unjust demand for reparations to the repeated U.S. occupations and international interventions, Haiti has been trapped in a cycle of dependency that is rooted in historical injustice and maintained by global apathy and power asymmetries.

The colonial legacy haunts Haiti's institutions and its global image. It explains why the nation was forced to pay its former oppressors, why its democratic experiments have been repeatedly undermined by foreign powers, and why, even in times of crisis, aid flows bypass local governance in favor of unaccountable international NGOs. The repeated failure of global responses, especially in the aftermath of the 2010 earthquake and the 2021 assassination of President Moïse, underscores a pattern of engagement that is reactive, paternalistic, and often damaging. Haiti becomes not a partner in its recovery, but a stage upon which global actors perform humanitarian virtue.

Yet, amid the collapse of imposed interventions, a new path emerges, one that rooted in Haitian leadership, self-determination, and historical redress. The Montana Accord, for instance, offers a powerful example of grassroots mobilization. It insists that political stability in Haiti cannot be imported. It must be forged from within, with international allies playing a supportive, not directive, role.

To truly reckon with Haiti's present, the global community must confront its own complicity in shaping that reality. This means not only restructuring aid and development policies but also acknowledging the debt owed to Haiti not as charity, but as reparative justice. It demands that the world reframe Haiti not as a "failed state" but as a nation repeatedly failed by those who professed to help it. Ultimately, Haiti's struggle is not isolated. It mirrors broader global dynamics in which former colonies continue to suffer under systems designed during their subjugation. Haiti teaches us that history does not end with independence. It must be followed by structural change, reparative policies, and the dismantling of the very systems that perpetuate inequality. As Adelman (2011) asserts, history has shaped today's relationships between nations. The legacy of exploitation has not been adequately addressed by reparative justice. Haiti's struggle calls on the international

community to move beyond token gestures of aid and instead support equitable global systems that prioritize dignity, agency, and sustainability. Only when these lessons are truly internalized can the world begin to undo the chains of the past and support Haiti in realizing the full promise of the revolution it gave to the world.

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