

Kidnapped Sovereignty: Haitian hunger and poverty as sociopolitical constructions of foreign actors

Soberania Sequestrada: fome e pobreza haitiana como construções sociopolíticas de atores estrangeiros

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ABSTRACT

Hunger and poverty in Haiti can be seen from the economic problems, political wars, international interference, and the high monetary sum paid for the country's independence in 1825 to France. These conjectures have contributed to the actual situation, a country immersed in political, economic, and social crises. The objective of this article is to analyze the evolving and definitive permanence of hunger from the perspective of external intromissions in Haiti. This article is a theoretical discussion of the essay type. The main ideas used for its construction were the following authors: Fleischmann Ulrich, Michel-Rolph Trouillot, Ricardo Seitenfus. Amartya Sen, Vanessa Braga Matijascic; Susan Stanford Friedman, Frantz Rousseau Déus, Arturo Escobar, Mohammed Ayoob e Jean-Bertrand Aristide. It was concluded that the Haitian people and Haitian institutions must deal with their daily problems without any outside interference and reinforce the commitment to respect the sovereignty of an independent country.

Keywords: Republic of Haiti; Hunger and poverty; Political freedom; Subaltern Realism.

RESUMO

A fome e a pobreza no Haiti devem ser analisadas a partir dos problemas econômicos, das guerras políticas, das intromissões internacionais e da alta soma monetária paga pela independência do país em 1825 à França. Tais aspectos têm contribuído para atual situação: um país mergulhado em uma crise política, econômica e social. O objetivo deste artigo é o de analisar a permanência evolutiva da fome sob a ótica das intromissões externas contra a liberdade política haitiana. Trata-se de uma discussão teórica do tipo ensaio baseada nas principais ideias de autores como Fleischmann Ulrich, Michel-Rolph Trouillot, Ricardo Seitenfus. Amartya Sen, Vanessa Braga Matijascic; Susan Stanford Friedman, Frantz Rousseau Déus, Arturo Escobar, Mohammed Ayoob e Jean-Bertrand Aristide. Conclui-se que o povo haitiano e as instituições haitianas devem aprender a lidar com seus problemas cotidianos sem intromissões externas e que o respeito pela soberania de um país independente deve ser mantido.

Palavras-chave: República do Haiti; Fome e pobreza; Liberdade política; Realismo Subalterno.

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Introduction

Haiti's hunger and poverty must be analyzed taking into account the long history of the struggle for survival of a people politically deprived of their freedom of choice and unable to freely build a path that will lead them to remedy the problems of hunger and extreme poverty. Haiti is one of the poorest countries in the world, located in Latin America and the Caribbean, with almost 60% of its approximately 11.5 million inhabitants living in poverty (Rasul et al., 2022; Exime et al., 2024), with problems of basic sanitation, lack of inputs and services in areas such as health, economy, politics and all the aggregates of the first needs of a living being, including hunger and food and nutritional insecurity.

According to data from the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations - FAO, (2021), around 9.4 million Haitians live in moderate and severe food insecurity, which consists of a prevalence rate of 82%. In addition, around 5.4 million people are malnourished, highlighting the notable lack of food (Fao, 2023). In addition, food price inflation in Haiti has continued to rise in recent years, exceeding 48% in 2023, which has a direct impact on the daily diet of Haitian society, whose per capita income was US\$1,420 in 2021, the lowest among Latin American and Caribbean countries (World Bank, 2023).

These issues increase unemployment, according to data from the l'Institut Haïtien de Statistique et d'Informatique – IHSI, (2021) and the Ministère de l'Economie et des Finances (MEF), 30% of the Haitian population is unemployed, 50% of this total the youngest, according to an economic plan launched in 2020¹ in an attempt to contain the social problems of society, where more than half of the population lives on less than US\$1.90 a day, below the international poverty line (Mef, 2020; Ihsi, 2021).

In this study, it is understood that freedom is related to the economic issue, which directly implies the lack of basic sanitation and investment to meet basic daily needs. In underdeveloped countries - countries that are economically and socially poor, marked by hunger and misery, and politically weak in the international context (Ayoob, 2002a, 2002b) - economic freedom is usually denied by a lack of governance and government action, as well as access to necessities (Sen, 1999). In the Haitian case, freedom was/is permanently denied by external actors, who for various reasons have denied national autonomy since its independence.

The Republic of Haiti has a complex history due to the amount of time it has endured and faced hunger and lack of employment, aspects that have historically impacted the lives of the country's citizens. Cultural and political practices persist that interfere with the solution of political and social problems and cause economic and financial in-

1 The Post-Covid-19 Economic Recovery Plan (Prepoc 2020-2023) is the result of participatory and inclusive work involving the public sector, representatives of civil society and the Haitian economy, as well as private sector organizations (Mef, 2020).

security, which, according to Sen (1999, p. 30), can be called “the absence of democratic rights and freedom.”

Haitian democratic life suffers the impact of these issues because, morally, they affect social institutions, which are no longer active in the construction of political ideas that could be transformed into collective or societal projects that contribute to the maintenance of democracy and lost freedom (Escobar, 2004; Ayooob, 2002a, 2002b).

The Haitian people have had a history of foreign debts imposed by capitalist powers since they were built as a nation-state, which has led the country to wage a constant struggle to resurrect an autonomous development plan. For Seguy (2014), this situation leads to instability and serious internal problems. In Haiti's case, these problems are magnified by the deleterious actions of the local political classes and the constant interference and occupation by the international community, which seems unaware of Haiti's real needs in terms of natural, social, and economic problems, as well as the permanent culture of political disorganization of a people who have been violently subordinated since the revolution that led to independence from their colonizer, France. This revolution was started by the former slave Toussaint Louverture and carried out by Jean-Jacques Desalines, who mobilized the slaves to rebel against the French colonialist system in search of freedom. The Haitian revolution began in 1791 and lasted until independence was achieved in 1804 when Haiti became the first Latin American nation to abolish slavery. However, even in the face of this initial pioneering, the country currently remains in a situation of low adherence to critical organizational collectivism (Exime; Pallú; Plein, 2022).

The lack of control over material resources and the lack of prospects for economic progress is closely associated with the monetary independence tax paid since 1825, which was a veritable armed robbery that undermined the autonomy and capacity of the state to promote social and economic development (Seitenfus, 2016). This foreign debt has increased Haitian poverty. Added to this is the fact that several Haitian governments have been marked by corruption, authoritarianism, and submission to the neoliberal guidelines imposed by the US, which did not want a new left-wing political experiment in its zone of influence, like the Cuban Revolution.

Thus, when thinking about the hunger and poverty of Haitian citizens, it becomes logical to reflect on the role of Haitian political freedom, which is considered fragile in terms of the people's inability to exercise their right to political opinion to elect representatives who can act effectively in the fight against social problems (Ciorciari, 2022).

The aim of this article is therefore to analyze the persistence of hunger and poverty from the perspective of external interference in Haiti. To this end, the article is divided into two topics: the first seeks to reflect on the history of Haiti, and the second, on political freedom associated with the theory of subaltern realism from the Haitian perspective.

A story linked to hunger and the colonizers' abuse of power

In 1492, the island, inhabited until then only by the Taíno Indians, was taken over by the colonizer Christopher Columbus, who thought he was reaching India and began forcing the natives to work in the mines. After the arrival of the European invaders, the island was called La Española and soon changed to Hispaniola, which means little Spain in America. During this period, control of the Atlantic was established and European colonialism was born (Escobar, 2004).

The colonization by the French and Spanish led to the exploitation of fishing and agriculture, when the island began to produce large quantities of sugar for Europe, mainly for the Dutch. As the slave labor situations were unhealthy and exhausting, many workers became ill and, at the end of the 15th century, the Spanish abandoned the territory that would become Haiti. This situation of intense exploitation of slave labor changed with the Treaty of Ryswick in 1697, which divided the island between colonial powers. Signed between France, the United Provinces, currently the territory of the Netherlands, England, and Spain at the beginning of 1697, this treaty led the Spanish to return to the island, dividing the space with the French into two western parts: the Spanish Dominican Republic and French Haiti (Mott, 1973; Matijascic, 2010).

From then on, agricultural production continued in the plantation system through the exploitation of slave labor bought from Africa, but the profit was divided between France and Spain. The situation of extreme exploitation of enslaved labor gave rise to the revolt of 1791:

In 1790, the population of Saint Domingue totaled 520,000.10 inhabitants, of which 425,000 were numbered slaves and the basis of the pyramidal social order. Other groups were classified according to wealth and skin color and included: freed slaves, mixed race “mulattos”, white smallholders, and white plantation owners [...] (Phillips, 2008, p. 2 free translation).

From 1791 onwards, changes began to take place that solidified until the declaration of interdependence in 1804, after violent battles that massacred the island's occupying forces. The first of these was a political split that resulted in the formation of opposing groups: one of the supporters who remained faithful to the monarchical regime of Louis XVI and a second group formed by supporters of the French Revolution. Another relevant aspect of the revolt was the appointment, the following year, of the former slave Toussaint Louverture as major-general, who had taken part in the war between France and Spain that ended in 1795 (Phillips, 2008), and was taken prisoner to France in 1802, where he remained until his death.

The situation that revolted the slaves and contributed to independence on January 1, 1804, was the violent death of Jean-Jacques Dessaline, leader of the revolution and first emperor of Haiti in 1806, by his compatriots from the revolution, a situation that divided the island once again, leading to the weakening of the leadership of the time (Trouillot, 1990; Pattee, 1936; Mott, 1973).

After the Revolution, France left Haiti and imposed an independence tax of 150 million francs, which limited economic development, resulting in a period of internal crisis for Haiti. It is worth noting that no other country had to pay such a high fee for its independence as Haiti, a situation that had an impact on the economy and sectors of great importance for the country's growth. The first installments of this payment were paid through a loan to a French bank for 30 million francs, which bankrupted Haiti in the same year (Fleischmann, 2008).

In the following years, especially in 1838, under threat from French warships off the Haitian coast, the country was forced to pay the remainder of the 150 million franc independence tax. According to Fleischmann (2008), at that time, 60 million francs were paid and the rest was negotiated in installments that were only concluded in 1883 when the French government received the remaining 90 million. However, Haiti's debts to France were not paid off until 1922, when the United States of America took over financial control of Haiti and intervened in the state's sovereignty (James, 2010; Girard, 2010).

There was then a loan from the National Bank of Haiti, but the country was unable to pay off the previously accumulated debts, which led to high interest rates, instability, uncertainty, and infighting that affected exports and left public coffers empty. This situation led the country to implement high taxes levied directly on farmers to generate resources to pay off the debts, which had an impact on agricultural production and food security, which have still not recovered to this day (Phillips, 2008).

The US military occupied the country from 1915, imposing new economic rules and promising economic and political aid for 10 years in a row. The situation began to improve economically due to the modernization process, but this progress was limited to elite groups, leaving the peasant class at the mercy of political power, which led to dissatisfaction among the people, who began to demand an end to the US occupation. The peasants revolted above all because, in exchange for the pacification and modernization of Haiti, the US demanded land ownership. As the country, liquidated by foreign debt, no longer had any public land, the local elites decided to cede the arable land of small farmers to US landowners, aggravating hunger in the countryside and the food supply crisis, which created a niche market for US agribusiness products (Déus, 2020; Andrade, 2016).

During the invasion of the United States of America, due to changes in the patterns of state intervention imposed by the invading power, the Haitian state lost the ability to regulate its domestic food production, relegating this responsibility to local economic and political elites who had an interest in maintaining the country as an import market for food from US producers. Although this policy aggravated hunger and poverty, it continued and was deepened in 1980, when the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank did not support the investment plan to produce agricultural products, especially rice, the staple of the Haitian diet, claiming that Haiti received everything from the US, via export, at no additional cost, preserving the interests of US rice farmers to the detriment of Haiti's food sovereignty.

The end of the US occupation came in August 1934, when Haiti completely lost its economic stability due to the great economic depression of 1929, a capitalist structural crisis that affected the world economy between 1929 and 1934. In the post-US occupation period, Haiti suffered several US-backed coups d'état and, in 1957, the dictatorship of President François Duvalier, also known as "Papa Doc", began, lasting until he died in 1971. His son, Jean-Claude Duvalier, then took power and began the government known as "Baby Doc", which lasted until 1986, when it was overthrown by a popular uprising (Phillips, 2008; Déus, 2020).

Then, after the Duvalier era, there were new economic crises until the electoral contest of Father Jean-Bertrand Aristide, a priest and popular leader aligned with liberation theology, who won Haiti's first free election in 1990, democratically, with great popularity and promises to end hunger and poverty through a national reconstruction project, but which generated great political and economic instability, resulting in a new coup d'état in 1991, also supported by the US, which deposed him. Aristide had a political project that incorporated the demands of the working classes in the countryside and the city, but his deposition set up a period in which Haiti suffered strong economic and humanitarian aid barriers and blockades, which increased the food crisis that had already been consolidated since 1970 (Dupuy, 2006; 2013; Aristide, 1994).

In 2000, Jean-Bertrand Aristide came to power again and began a renewed government. According to Phillips (2008), this period saw the start of an economic restructuring project in which, in 2002, a request was made for the return of the money withdrawn by France in payment of the independence debt, amounting to 21 billion US dollars. Aristide's return to the presidency was met by a new organization of the right and the most conservative sectors of the political classes, which fomented violence and popular uprisings, bringing the country to the brink of civil war. This situation was used to justify a new international occupation, carried out by the United Nations Stabilization Mission in Haiti - MINUSTAH, a UN Security Council program whose objective was to guarantee the stability of the country, and which was led

by Brazilian military personnel. As far as the social dimension is concerned, this mission did not have popular support, justified by the insecurity of the people. Consequently, the intention to guarantee improvements and promote projects in the areas of security, and health, ended up being ineffective in guaranteeing political order, in addition to suspending the project of reconstruction and national autonomy defended by Aristide (Seitenfus, 2016; Ciorciari, 2022).

It is thus understood that the current situation of deep social inequalities in Haiti and the issues of economic development, hunger, and poverty are, to a large extent, directly linked: the large sum paid to France for its independence, the massive dispossession of peasant land carried out by the US occupation, the violent military dictatorships that kept development restricted to the political and economic elites, the imposition of neoliberal structural adjustments by multilateral organizations in the 1980s, which kept the country as an exporter of food and manufactured goods and, finally, the military occupation by MINUSTAH. As a result of this denial of Haitian sovereignty, especially by exogenous actors, there is a “denied modernization” that drags the country into extreme poverty. The impact of this denied modernization has led to the republic’s major problems, as Fleischmann (2008) explains:

The “denied modernity” weighed heavily on the small state that was recognized as the Holy See, with other nations seeing little advantage in losing France’s good graces to such an insignificant country. France’s political recognition was therefore the main condition for demobilization and a return to normality. Having reunited the entire island under the Haitian flag in 1822, the new President Boyer sought to enter into negotiations with France. France demanded nothing less than that its citizens be compensated for the land and slaves they had lost, an unacceptable condition for the Haitians. On July 15, 1825, a squadron of several warships dropped anchor in the port of Port-au-Prince to deliver an Ordinance from the King of France, Charles X, to the Haitian Senate. The threat was obvious and the Haitian government gave in to what seemed inevitable: diplomatic recognition of Haiti, in exchange for an indemnity of 150 million francs and customs privileges granted to France. That same evening, the Haitian government organized a reception for the French admirals, whom the chronicles describe as cheerful and beautiful (Fleischmann, 2008, p. 166, free translation).

The abusive compensation demanded by France negated Haiti’s development process which, without funds to invest in social and economic policies, remained in a process of political, economic, and social immaturity, with its public funds hijacked by foreign imperialist actors.

To restructure the Haitian economy, it would first be necessary to overcome the social debt of the French colonial heritage, since Haiti’s colonial past lives on when you

consider the effects it still has on the extreme poverty of the people. These issues have meant that the country has simply been lost in the scarcity of financial resources to maintain itself as an independent state since 1804 (Trouillot, 1990; Pattee, 1936).

We can thus see a history full of struggles and also marked by foreign meddling since the colonizers did not respect the countries (colonized) that remained economically, socially, and politically vulnerable, leading to a picture in which there seems to be a forgetting of the effects of international occupations and undue charges. Thus, the remnants of colonization are present in the denied modernization (Friedman, 2012). In the context of neo-colonialism, the establishment of indirect economic and financial control of Latin American countries by the European powers is understood as domination exercised through trade and promises of integration (Fernandes, 2009). This situation continues to this day, with strong external interference and domination from the perspective of economic needs, as well as influences on political aspects that extend to cultural elements in Haitian society (Célius, 1997).

This modernization denied to vulnerable countries was initiated by the colonizing countries, so modernization still bears the traces of colonization. This can be seen in the lack of access to the technologies and policies available to combat inequality (Friedman, 2012) and the lack of political opportunity to maintain economic stability. External meddling and the low effectiveness of institutions and collective action characterize the permanence of these countries between the development process and the absence of denied progress. (Gumbrecht, 1998).

Political freedom and the theory of subaltern realism from a Haitian perspective

Attempts to confront the problems faced by underdeveloped countries require an understanding of the situations in which they find themselves in the economic field. On the horizon of peripheral economic discussions, it is considered a constant challenge to deal with colonial impacts, which continue to limit the sovereignty of independent states, forming a kind of subaltern realism:

Although subaltern realism does not necessarily attempt to replace or surpass neorealism and neoliberalism as a “theory” that can fully explain how the international system operates, it does a good job of filling important gaps in the theoretical literature and correcting the acute state of inequality that permeates international relations theory (Ayoob, 2002, p. 47).

The theory of subaltern realism is more concerned with situations of extreme poverty, inequality, and economic disproportion between developed and underdeveloped

countries. This unequal world in the international context uses pretexts based on cooperation and the offer of solidarity aid, which creates a certain type of obedience, directly affecting national sovereignty. In other words, cooperation also benefits the helping country because of the dependence the receiving country is placed in. The actors involved in cooperation also assume responsibility for economic influence and social cohesion within these units, influencing their relationship with each other and generating false reciprocity, since fragile countries depend on external benefits and are often neglected by the economic powers (Barnett, 2002; Ayooob, 2002a, 2002b).

Thus, subaltern realism understands that peripheral (underdeveloped) states are generally weak politically and militarily, and often depend on external benefits from developed rich and industrialized countries. In addition, states are limited in their interactions with each other, so the theory has an enormous capacity to explain the weaknesses of poor countries (Ayooob, 2002a, 2002b).

The group of central capitalist countries is made up of large empires, with a very stable economy, and they act in the international system in conflicts that lead to the emergence of terrorist groups and migratory crises (Ayooob, 2002, 1989). On the other hand, the actions of the economic powers have led to interference in the internal affairs of independent countries, alleging various actions such as party political crises, human rights, and civil wars to intervene in the name of freedom in a democratically free world. It is at this juncture that the crisis of countries like Haiti, which has been experiencing international meddling since before the formation of the state in 1804, presents itself.

Haiti is currently experiencing a huge problem due to the increase in its foreign debt, which has reached 2.76 billion dollars, according to data from 2020 Index Mundi, (2020), with significant increases every year (Exime, 2021). In addition, the Gross Domestic Product (GDP), even with foreign aid, shows no sign of growing, as the debts weigh too heavily compared to what it is capable of producing, directly impacting the quality of life and generating hunger for around 6 million Haitians.

Thus, true economic freedom, which is not that imposed by neoliberal and imperialist actors, can have a strong impact on political freedom and this condition seems to be a hallmark of Haiti's historical construction. Political freedom also guarantees cultural freedom. In the Haitian case, for example, voodoo stands out, a religion in which male practitioners are called ougan or bòkò and women are called manbo and their resistance represents a struggle for cultural and political freedom. In this context, the Iwa (loa) Marinette Bois Sèch stands out as one of the icons in the defense of the oppressed in search of equality, as she is one of the most revered loas in the Haitian voodoo religion when it comes to freedom (Laguerre, 2016; Galvin et al., 2022).

It is important to note that Haitian ideas of political freedom and popular movements have always had a strong connection with voodoo. Voodoo and its complex ideas about unity and freedom on a material and spiritual level also played an important role in the country's struggle for independence.

Given the importance of this issue, in terms of freedom, meddling, and Haitian history, it is necessary to bring up some reflective propositions that can help in understanding the subject and serve as a measure or possible points to reflect Haiti's political trajectory. We highlight five issues that need to be considered to guarantee improvements and effective changes concerning hunger, political freedom, subalternity, meddling, and corruption by the political elite and state organizations.

Firstly, it is necessary to consider the historical role of foreign meddling in the decisions of rulers throughout history, which calls for the strengthening of the country's democratic institutions to promote transparency in the fight against corruption and the enhancement of freedom in the judiciary, to provide stability and prevent external interference. Secondly, it is the government's responsibility to train Haitian society about their rights in politics and their duties as citizens, remembering the historical legacies of liberty, equality, and fraternity to reform the Haitian political system.

Thirdly, we need to guarantee actions that promote the social inclusion of the 60% of the population that lives in hunger and poverty, marginalized, giving young people, women, and the 42% of rural Haitians the opportunity to propose ideas to influence public policies, making them subjects of the public sphere. Fourthly, there must be a consensus on how to monitor the powers and institutions of government, especially about popular oversight, the demand for accountability, transparency and punishment for corruption, social and community control, and participation.

Finally, it is believed that there is no point in looking for a way to reduce hunger, social problems, exclusion, and freedom from political rights without establishing dialogues to build a collective national project centered on rescuing and renewing the sovereignty sought by the 1804 Revolution.

The critical thoughts set out in this article are important for building political freedom in the sense of the authenticity of being free (De Castro, 2010). It is worth noting that other researchers are proposing other reflections to deal with the challenges Haitians face due to the lack of political freedom interconnected with the fight against hunger, such as investing in education to reduce social inequalities and unemployment (Pierre, 2020; Fleurant, 2020). Others point to education as the key to dealing with the problems of security and political stability (Graveus, 2021).

From an international and national perspective, the impacts of these challenges create even more inequality, because, in an underdeveloped country like Haiti, every citizen

has to fight to strategically survive hunger and extreme poverty, facing malnutrition, lack of access to health services, basic sanitation, and insecurity, which are just some of the problems faced by the Haitian population.

Final Considerations

The Haitian nation's structural problems originated in the independence process mainly concerning the payment of debts to France, which generated economic and social crises that deepened in the 1980s. These crises involved the US, which invaded and then supported violent military dictatorships, and the occupation by international forces, such as MINUSTAH, which, in the name of pacification and re-establishing order, suspended the project to rebuild national sovereignty sought by the Aristide government. As a result, Haiti continues to be plunged into extreme poverty, with democratic and political crises.

Hunger and poverty in Haiti are rooted in the way the country's economic development process was handled, linked to modernity denied by the payment of debts to France and the plundering of agricultural wealth. This has limited the construction of strong institutions capable of responding to the problems of a nation without external resources and with an insignificant public fund, a situation that has a direct impact on the democratic processes of the nation's political life.

In addition, the invisible solidarity of international communities has always influenced the country by meddling in its internal affairs, be they political, economic, or social. Thus, many of Haiti's problems are directly linked to invasions, and political wars caused by the influence of the international community in dictating the rules on what should be done in the country without knowing the real causes and without having a deep understanding of the nature of hunger and the needs of the people, and national ideas about emancipation and autonomy, such as those based on voodoo, which promoted the black revolution of 1804.

From this perspective, the idea of freeing the Haitian people from negative external interference and their institutions is defended to reinforce the commitment to respect the sovereignty of an independent country. It is also necessary to reverse the traces of the colonizers in modernization, such as the lack of resources, exhausted and outdated technologies, the make-up of self-help ideologies, false neoliberal solidarity, and countless unfulfilled promises that directly affect poor countries. In the same vein, Haitian society is criticized for not standing up for itself when it comes to electing its leaders, demanding campaign promises from politicians, demanding accountability for public spending to avoid corruption, and being aware of the criminal acts against poor and hungry society without the political freedom to influence the country's decisions.

Future studies should focus on the issue of extreme poverty and hunger based on the political culture of the Haitian people, seeking to understand how Haitians manage to maintain a certain kind of visual happiness amid daily turbulence and suffering. Finally, it is suggested that further work be carried out to critically analyze the theoretical and explanatory elements of hunger and poverty in Haiti produced by the neoliberal think tanks located in multilateral organizations such as the World Bank, the IMF, and the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), which continue to be the hegemonic think tanks for overcoming the acute expressions of the social question in the Caribbean country.

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