

# The Hate and the Quake

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by Sir Hilary Beckles



THE UNIVERSITY OF THE WEST INDIES is in the process of conceiving how best to deliver a major conference on the theme Rethinking And Rebuilding Haiti.

I am very keen to provide an input into this exercise because for too long there has been a popular perception that somehow the Haitian nation-building project, launched on January 1, 1804, has failed on account of mismanagement, ineptitude, corruption.

Buried beneath the rubble of imperial propaganda, out of both Western Europe and the United States, is the evidence which shows that Haiti's independence was defeated by an aggressive North-Atlantic alliance that could not imagine their world inhabited by a free regime of Africans as representatives of the newly emerging democracy.

The evidence is striking, especially in the context of France.

The Haitians fought for their freedom and won, as did the Americans fifty years earlier. The Americans declared their independence and crafted an extraordinary constitution that set out a clear message about the value of humanity and the right to freedom, justice, and liberty.

In the midst of this brilliant discourse, they chose to retain slavery as the basis of the new nation state. The founding fathers therefore could not see beyond race, as the free state was built on a slavery foundation.

The water was poisoned in the well; the Americans went back to the battlefield a century later to resolve the fact that slavery and freedom could not comfortably co-exist in the same place.

The French, also, declared freedom, fraternity and equality as the new philosophies of their national transformation and gave the modern world a tremendous progressive boost by so doing.

They abolished slavery, but Napoleon Bonaparte could not imagine the republic without slavery and targeted the Haitians for a new, more intense regime of slavery. The British agreed, as did the Dutch, Spanish and Portuguese.

All were linked in communion over the 500 000 Blacks in Haiti, the most populous and prosperous Caribbean colony.

As the jewel of the Caribbean, they all wanted to get their hands on it. With a massive slave base, the English, French and Dutch salivated over owning it - and the people.

The people won a ten-year war, the bloodiest in modern history, and declared their independence. Every other country in the Americas was based on slavery.

Haiti was freedom, and proceeded to place in its 1805 Independence Constitution that any person of African descent who arrived on its shores would be declared free, and a citizen of the republic.

For the first time since slavery had commenced, Blacks were the subjects of mass freedom and citizenship in a nation.

The French refused to recognise Haiti's independence and declared it an illegal pariah state. The Americans, whom the Haitians looked to in solidarity as their mentor in independence, refused to recognise them, and offered solidarity instead to the French. The British, who were negotiating with the French to obtain the ownership title to Haiti, also moved in solidarity, as did every other nation-state the Western world.

Haiti was isolated at birth - ostracised and denied access to world trade, finance, and institutional development. It was the most vicious example of national strangulation recorded in modern history.

The Cubans, at least, have had Russia, China, and Vietnam. The Haitians were alone from inception. The crumbling began.

Then came 1825; the moment of full truth. The republic is celebrating its 21st anniversary. There is national euphoria in the streets of Port-au-Prince.

The economy is bankrupt; the political leadership isolated. The cabinet took the decision that the state of affairs could not continue.

The country had to find a way to be inserted back into the world economy. The French government was invited to a summit.

Officials arrived and told the Haitian government that they were willing to recognise the country as a sovereign nation but it would have to pay compensation and reparation in exchange. The Haitians, with backs to the wall, agreed to pay the French.

The French government sent a team of accountants and actuaries into Haiti in order to place a value on all lands, all physical assets, the 500 000 citizens were who formerly enslaved, animals, and all other commercial properties and services.

The sums amounted to 150 million gold francs. Haiti was told to pay this reparation to France in return for national recognition.

The Haitian government agreed; payments began immediately. Members of the Cabinet were also valued because they had been enslaved people before independence.

Thus began the systematic destruction of the Republic of Haiti. The French government bled the nation and rendered it a failed state. It was a merciless exploitation that was designed and guaranteed to collapse the Haitian economy and society.

Haiti was forced to pay this sum until 1922 when the last instalment was made. During the long 19th century, the payment to France amounted to up to 70 per cent of the country's foreign exchange earnings.

Jamaica today pays up to 70 per cent in order to service its international and domestic debt. Haiti was crushed by this debt payment. It descended into financial and social chaos.

The republic did not stand a chance. France was enriched and it took pleasure from the fact that having been defeated by Haitians on the battlefield, it had won on the field of finance. In the years when the coffee crops failed, or the sugar yield was down, the Haitian government borrowed on the French money market at double the going interest rate in order to repay the French government.

When the Americans invaded the country in the early 20th century, one of the reasons offered was to assist the French in collecting its reparations.

The collapse of the Haitian nation resides at the feet of France and America, especially. These two nations betrayed, failed, and destroyed the dream that was Haiti; crushed to dust in an effort to destroy the flower of freedom and the seed of justice.

Haiti did not fail. It was destroyed by two of the most powerful nations on earth, both of which continue to have a primary interest in its current condition.

The sudden quake has come in the aftermath of summers of hate. In many ways the quake has been less destructive than the hate.

Human life was snuffed out by the quake, while the hate has been a long and inhumane suffocation - a crime against humanity.

During the 2001 UN Conference on Race in Durban, South Africa, strong representation was made to the French government to repay the 150 million francs.

The value of this amount was estimated by financial actuaries as US\$21 billion. This sum of capital could rebuild Haiti and place it in a position to re-engage the modern world. It was illegally extracted from the Haitian people and should be repaid.

It is stolen wealth. In so doing, France could discharge its moral obligation to the Haitian people.

For a nation that prides itself in the celebration of modern diplomacy, France, in order to exist with the moral authority of this diplomacy in this post-modern world, should do the just and legal thing.

Such an act at the outset of this century would open the door for a sophisticated interface of past and present, and set the Haitian nation free at last.

# The Hate and the Quake: Part Two By Sir Hilary Beckles

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When the Americans defeated the British and declared National Independence, it was done by way of advancing the emerging spirit of democracy. Thirty years later when the Haitians, following the Americans, defeated Napoleon's mighty army, repelled Spanish and British military invasions, and declared on January 1, 1804, the second nation state in the hemisphere, the new advocate of democracy was isolated and coldly strangled by forces acting in the interest of democracy.

The Americans built but half a democracy. They retained slavery as the core of their nation. The Haitians went all the way. They placed in the Independence Constitution that slavery and slave trading were crimes. Universal freedom was proclaimed. But that was not all. It stood up for blacks in every society by providing, at Article 44, that any black person or indigenous native who arrived on the shores of Haiti would be immediately declared free and a citizen of the republic.

The Americans, British, French, Dutch, and Spanish, clinging to black and native slavery as the model of development, condemned the Haitians for this deep democratic constitutional stance. Haiti, in bold print and audacious policy, established itself as the centre of world democracy and the only nation in the western world where all inhabitants were invested with the status of legal freedom and constitutional citizenship. It became the only society where working-class people joined the privileged classes in running the government and shaping the framework of nation building. Haiti gave the world this gift of universal freedom and democratic participation. The Americans and Europeans were talking about this in theory while the Haitians set out to craft it in reality.

“Crush the infamy and kill the infant” became the motto of Europe and America. Never before has a nation done so much good and in turn received so much evil. Never before in history have a people given so much liberty and freedom to the world, for which it should live in credit, but has been driven to dwell for decades in the deep despair of debt. Never before in the history of civilization has the political, constitutional and philosophical contribution of a people and nation been erased from the record with such persistent precision leaving subsequent generations to ponder their plight in pity. These are crimes greater than slavery. The theft of Haitian intellectual property as the source of modern democracy continues to be overlooked by academics schooled in the idea that ancient Rome and Greece, both slave societies, are the ancestral homes of the idea of democracy.

The Americans turned their back on Haiti, their kindred spirits in nation building. Haiti's call for support and solidarity was rejected. The French were comforted by this, and on the 21<sup>st</sup> anniversary of its Independence, while children were dancing in the streets of Port au-Prince, French gun boats pulled into the harbour, discreetly backed up at a distance by the Americans' navy. Independence celebrations took place against the background of a pending joint French-American invasion to “crush the infamy and kill the infant.” This would not be the first time that the Americans would support the French in a military operation in Haiti. This is how President Aristide was kidnapped and removed from office in 2004.

French gun to his head, and American bayonet to his back, the brilliant distinguished President Boyer of Haiti signed the treaty to pay France 150 million gold francs in reparation for their freedom. One hundred thousand persons had died in the battle for freedom. The land of sugar ran in blood as slavery was overthrown. The payment of reparation on top of the death of 25 per cent of the population, women and children accounting for 40 per cent, was merciless to say the least. But the nation wished to join the community of nations. It was the death knell of the young, fledgling nation. King Charles of France signed his 10<sup>th</sup> decree, and the blood money began to flow royally out of Port-au-Prince into Paris, and continued uninterrupted until 1922, then resumed again until 1947.

As the Haitian nation buckled under debt and threat of joint French-American military invasions, the consequences of a crippled country began to evolve into the world now wrecked by the quake. Nothing on earth but a quake could focus the world's attention on a crime long committed and gone covered up, buried by the power of the "West" to tell the world how to see and think.

Toussaint L'Ouverture led the Holy Grail of freedom. Betrayed by France as he offered to give diplomacy a chance, he was imprisoned in France, beheaded and buried in secret. Today, the nation of Haiti knows not where the head of its first Head of State is buried. The French know and will not tell. The beheading of L'Ouverture and the hiding of his head was France's first step in beheading the young nation. "Kill the first born", a king once said. Haiti was the western world's first born.

Then came the quake, another example of nature unearthing that which has been concealed by man.

Economic strangulation led to financial chaos. It served to ignite and sustain the ethnic conflict between blacks and coloured that racked national politics and became a way of life. The coloureds believed the blacks were less fit to rule and the blacks did not trust their willingness to ally with France. The peasants, meanwhile, wanted their class independence from the State that insisted upon being an integral part of the world economy. Peasants fought to delink from global trade; elites oppressed them to deepen the link. The coup and assassination became common means by which governments changed. A culture of bloody political conflict ripped at the spine of the nation in much the same way, and for the same reasons, that France had executed its aristocracy, England beheaded its King, and Americans shot its greatest President at an earlier time.

As the nation collapsed into conflict, the distance between rich and poor, peasants and property holders grew wider. The elite borrowed to sustain the government as peasants intensified their preference for less exposure to the world economy. The weight of the national debt grew larger as the payment of reparations proved impossible to sustain. Port-au-Prince borrowed more from Paris to pay Paris; then Main Street added Wall Street to the list, which eventually led to the American invasion in 1915.

The Americans seized all financial and revenue sources, including the customs and all excise departments. It held on to these until 1947 when the well had been sucked dry. Popular rebellion against the Americans led to the rise of the Duvaliers – "Papa Doc" and "Baby Doc". The Haitians jumped out of the frying pan and into the fire. Debt and death danced to the sound of the

scream that was once a dream. “Domesticate the hate” joined “crush the infamy” as the revised mantra; together they bore witness to the quake.

For 200 years, the debt had driven Haitian life under the rubble where, today, life survives as a miracle. The infant and the elderly were pulled to safety only to die before the world’s eyes that had been closed without a care. The quake shook those eyes wide awake, but the debt remains. The French know only too well of the crime committed. While, in spite, they succeeded in starving a young nation, the US \$21 billion owed cannot be removed from its imperial balance sheet simply by removing President Aristide. Puppet Prime Minister Latortue, placed by France and America in the palace now lying in ruin, might have withdrawn Aristide’s demand upon the French, but the people of Haiti, and all freedom-loving citizens the world over, are resolved that France has no chance of turning this fact into fiction.

Only a Marshall plan, European style, will do. The rebuilding of Haiti must begin with the digging up of the truth about a nation buried under 200 years of lies and hate. The ‘West’ owes Haiti for standing up for freedom when all around was slavery and human denigration. Haiti pulled the modern world out of the pit into which it fell by its global embrace of slavery as an instrument of modernity. The debt to Haiti is more than the US \$21 billion stolen by the French. After 1804 the boat people were dying to get into Port-au-Prince. Thousands fled from Jamaica, the Bahamas, down through the Florida Keys, up through the islands from south into Central and South America. Haiti was the haven.

France will never be able to repay the Haitians for its crimes against them – nor the Americans for their complicity – but it must begin with acceptance and atonement. Great nations need humility. The Haitians have shown this to be true. It is now France’s turn to turn the page of its sordid sojourn amongst the dying, and dig itself out from under the rubble in Port-au-Prince.

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