

PEASANTS AND POVERTY

A STUDY OF HAITI

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had been settled by that time. Nevertheless, the size of Haitian farms has continued to decline during the twentieth century, and we must now focus on the reasons for this phenomenon.

Subdivision through Inheritance

The most important mechanism that has actively promoted subdivision is one which was already present during the previous century: the system of inheritance. As active redistribution and squatting have ceased to have any practical importance, inheritance has become the prime vehicle of subdivision.

The Haitian laws governing succession have always been based on the principles of the *Code Napoléon*. All children have equal rights to the property of their parents when the latter die. This fundamental principle is valid not only for legitimate children but also for such natural children that have been acknowledged: *Tout piti sé piti*. Two categories are legally excluded — natural children born after marriage (who cannot be acknowledged) and adopted children, but custom and practice (at least as far as natural children are concerned) have deprived this limitation of its practical value. There are many ways to circumvent the laws:

... custom, which sanctions polygamy, impels a father to care for his adulterine children, even though the law does not compel him to do so. He can provide for them in various ways. He can give their mother some land, which they will sooner or later inherit. He can also transfer them property through a 'feigned sale' to them. Finally, he can ask his legal wife to acknowledge, as her own, the child of the concubine. The civil registrars, who are quite used to the peasants' irregular acts of commission or omission, show no surprise if a married couple 'declare' a child to them several years after its birth; and there is no lack of witnesses who are ready to come forward for this purpose.⁷⁵

For adopted children the situation is more precarious. Neither law nor custom give them any right of inheritance, but even if there are other heirs, adopted children generally receive some kind of present or deed.⁷⁶*

Thus, the inheritance system works so as to divide landed property into equal shares to be distributed among the heirs, and hence a small farm of perhaps not more than one carreau may be split into as many

* As a rule the surviving spouse administers the property of the deceased, so that the final division of the inheritance takes place only after both spouses are dead.

as seven or eight small plots in the course of a single generation.⁷⁷

Relative Abundance of Labor

It is obvious that given the lack of a land market, an inheritance system where all heirs inherit equal shares of the property leads to smaller farms than for example, a system where the oldest son takes the entire landed property of his father. However, once we allow for the opportunity to buy and sell land in the market, the former system can no longer guarantee that farms are kept small. We must look for other reasons as well — factors of a more fundamental character which will operate regardless of the particular system of inheritance.

The population expanded during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Factor proportions changed once more as the demographic gap left by the revolution was filled. At the same time land became increasingly scarce. Labor, not land, became the relatively abundant factor in the economy, and this has acted to keep farm size down in at least two ways.

As we can deduce from the model in the appendix, growth of the stock of laborious capital is likely to take place when labor becomes increasingly scarce in relation to land. This is the situation typical for the United States, for example, where there has been a drain of farm people into other occupations. Competition for labor from the non-agricultural sectors has exerted an upward pressure on agricultural wages. Thus, the exodus of farm people has led to increasing mechanization of farms, and since mechanized agriculture displays important economies of scale, farm size has had to be increased to take full advantage of this potential. The average farm size doubled in 25 years.⁷⁸ In Haiti exactly the opposite situation has prevailed. Labor has become increasingly plentiful in relation to land, and hence the incentives to mechanize agriculture have been lacking.*

On the other hand, according to the Sen model in the appendix, relative abundance of labor (relative scarcity of land) ought to stimulate the growth of the landesque capital stock — such capital that acts as a substitute for land. However, the possible economies of scale inherent in landesque capital are not likely to be nearly as strong as those stemming

* The increasing scarcity of labor in developed countries has typically been caused by the growth of the non-agricultural sector of the economy. As long as this growth is not significant enough to cause an upward trend in agricultural wages, the relative price of labor is likely to remain stagnant or fall (if population growth is fast enough). This mechanism may be analyzed either in a model of the Lewis type (Lewis (1954)) or in a more conventional model of the Rybczynski type, where capital grows more slowly than labor (Cf. e.g. Johnson (1971), pp. 35-40). Thus this argument really is an argument based upon the slow overall growth of the economy.

saying that maintaining a soldiery that size must have absorbed a significant portion of the Haitian budget. From the economic point of view, most of these military expenses could be regarded as a subsidy to officers and soldiers. Before 1825 the threat of a French return had been real indeed, but after that year most of the reasons for a large standing army disappeared, and with them went authority, discipline and efficiency. Leyburn quotes a contemporary French observer:

[The Haitians] who had never had more than a borrowed energy — that inspired by fear of French invasion — when they saw themselves freed, by a solemn treaty, from all attack on their coasts, seemed to allow their arms to drop relaxed at their sides, saying, Let's take a rest. The soldier who up till now had squeezed his body into a uniform and had subjected himself to European discipline, shouldering his arms, staring straight ahead as if seeing nothing, now began to leave unbuttoned the uniform which choked him, dragged a mattress into his sentry-box so that he might sleep through his watch, and let his cross slip to the earth never to pick it up again.⁴⁶

Doctor Brown was equally harsh in his judgement: 'the troops of Boyer are but mere hireling cut-throats, without character or habits of industry and ever ready to employ themselves in scenes of disorder and depredation.'⁴⁷

Not only did the army absorb budget resources, but it also dragged a portion of the available manpower away from the soil, which was left without cultivation, into an idle life in the garrisons:

The soldiers of the army are, from the nature of their employment, which prevents them from becoming fixed residents upon the soil, schooled in idleness, vice and disorder, and the policy of the government tends to perpetuate and increase the evil, by conferring a conventional superiority of rank upon the class of militiares over that of cultivators.⁴⁸

Still, Haiti continued to maintain its standing army. 'There was never any money for development. . . nearly all the available resources of the country being consumed, decade after decade, by the still enormous standing army, renewed wars against the Dominicans, and frequent *coups d'état*,' write Rotberg and Clague.⁴⁹ The 1848 budget indicates

that almost 65 percent of total government expenditures went to the army (almost ten times as much as to justice, education and public worship together), to which had to be added the funds for the police. The following year, the figure lay around 55 percent.⁵⁰ Although these figures may be exaggerated (presumably they do not cover debt service, for example), and in spite of the fact that budget funds were frequently diverted for uses other than those indicated, the comparative importance of war expenditures in the budget is clear. Haiti had occupied the Dominican Republic from 1821 to 1844, and in 1849 and 1855 Soulouque, who besides having built his dictatorship on the armed forces and created a paramilitary terror group (the *zingins*), made two abortive efforts to reconquer the eastern two-thirds of the island. Obviously, these wars were very costly. The second attempt ended in an amicable secured by French and British intervention, backed by the United States, which, it seems, was much due to European and American fears that Haiti would be unable to meet its debt obligations because of exaggerated military spending. The American Secretary of State, Daniel Webster, wrote to the US representative in the Haitian capital:

The material interests of these three countries [Great Britain, France, and the United States] are largely involved in the restoration and preservation of peace between the contending parties in Santo Domingo. France is a creditor of the government of Soulouque to a large amount. She cannot hope for a discharge of her debt when the resources of his country, instead of being developed by pacific pursuits and a part, at least, applied to the purpose, are checked in their growth and wasted in a war which countermines the state. . . If the Emperor Soulouque shall insist upon maintaining a belligerent attitude. . . you will unite with your colleagues in remonstrating against this course on his part. If remonstrations shall prove to be unavailing you will signify to the Emperor that you shall give immediate notice to your government, that the President [of the United States], with the concurrence of Congress, may adopt such measures, in cooperation with the governments of England and France, as may cause the three powers to be respected.⁵¹

Soulouque's successor, Geffard, spent at least \$20,000 per year on a well-organized network of spies reporting on his political adversaries,⁵² and according to Sir Spenser St John this practice was followed by several later presidents as well:

action of the governing classes from the masses. We demonstrate how government came to serve the single purpose of providing those in power with a substitute for the incomes and wealth that were lost with the landed estates and how politics in consequence was made synonymous with a race for the contents of the treasury, devoid of all meaningful purpose. The development and maintenance of a spoils system where graft and corruption became the main ingredients, the attempts made by the occupation forces to end this pattern, the reversal to the old pattern after the occupation and the new heights of corruption in the 1950s and 1960s are discussed in order to provide insight into the structure of objectives of the groups that held power in the field of economic affairs, and the lack of peasant participation in politics which is followed up to the present period. The chapter ends with an analysis of two other determinants of peasant passivity as far as politics is concerned: the form of rural government and the peasant *Weltanschauung*.

Government Neglect of Agriculture

The Nineteenth Century

Pétion's land reform created a class of free, independent peasants in Haiti. Nobody had to work for the benefit of others anymore, but whatever the soil produced accrued to the tillers themselves. In terms of productivity the land reform represented a step backwards, however. When the plantations disappeared, the GNP began to fall in Pétion's republic.

Boyer's attempt at recreating the plantation system in 1826 was clearly a reaction to the deteriorating conditions. When Boyer took over the northern part of the country from Christophe in 1820 he inherited a full treasury, while from Pétion two years earlier he had received nothing. In 1823, Boyer's treasury was empty, partly as a result of a corrupt administration, but even more due to declining agricultural productivity. The 1826 *Code Rural* proved to be a failure. It was simply ignored by the peasants, and there was nothing the administration could do to change this. A new agricultural policy was badly needed. Mere redistribution of land to the cultivators did not generate economic development but stagnation and retrogression, at least in terms of per capita production and incomes. New impulses were required to get agriculture going. Nevertheless, after the failure of the 1826 legislation, Boyer chose pure *laissez-faire* instead of active intervention.

Boyer's reluctance to intervene in agriculture set a precedent for virtually all his successors. Before 1826, the Haitian peasants did not receive any financial or technical assistance whatsoever from the government (other than continued land redistribution), and thereafter government undertakings with respect to agriculture were at best half-hearted. The main achievements are quickly accounted for. In 1862, President Geffard attempted to take advantage of the strong upward trend in cotton prices caused by the US Civil War and the blockade of the southern US ports by northern naval forces, and started to make plans for an extension of cotton cultivation in Haiti, including a program of leasing certain machinery to cotton cultivators, but the practical impact of the program turned out to be negligible.¹ The next measure to encourage agriculture came in 1883 when President Salomon made an unsuccessful attempt to revitalize cultivation of certain export crops by means of giving land grants to those peasants who agreed to grow the prescribed crops.² In the 1890s, Presidents Hypolite and Simon Sam finally undertook some repair work and new construction of roads and railroads linking various parts of the country which, if it had continued, might have proved beneficial to agriculture.³

Apart from these unsystematic efforts, agriculture received practically no assistance at all from 1843 to the beginning of the American occupation in 1915. Its share of the 1885-86 budget was a mere 6 percent,⁴ a figure which by the turn of the century had been reduced to 3 percent,⁵ most of which presumably went to salaries for the employees of the Department of Agriculture, which was diverted for other purposes, or which was not paid out at all. The main interest shown by the nineteenth-century governments in agriculture was as a source of taxes.⁶ The peasants were left to solve their own problems.

The Occupation: First Efforts at Economic Development

During its first seven years, from 1915 to 1922, the American occupation of Haiti had only a negligible impact on agriculture. The period was one of pacification and adjustment, not one of constructive efforts. The emphasis lay on the military aspects of administration while the civilian side was lagging behind. The main achievement was the establishment of peace and order, so sadly lacking before 1915. Some road construction and repair was carried out, but the trails on which a majority of the agricultural population depended for communication with market-places were left almost untouched. Repair of irrigation works, which had been deteriorating after the French had left the island was begun.

Leslie
The redistribution of government land which converted Haiti from a plantation economy to a peasant country was the outstanding exception to a pattern which was to crystallize during the nineteenth century. The dominant attitude of the Haitian governments towards the agricultural sector was to become one of non-intervention or, rather, passivity (except in matters of taxation). In the present chapter we will examine the historical evidence behind this contention, and begin an attempt (to be continued in Chapter 8) to trace the reasons behind the reluctance to initiate agricultural change.

The first part of the chapter provides the appropriate factual evidence. It shows that the period up to the American occupation in 1915 was characterized by an almost total lack of government action in the agricultural sector, that half-hearted attempts to initiate change were made during the occupation years, that neglect, lack of interest and at best, *ad hoc* measures took over after 1934, and finally, that this tradition of passivity has continued to dominate Haitian governments up to the present time.

To understand why the most important sector of the economy has received nothing but neglect from the authorities we subsequently go on to sketch four different trends in Haitian social and political history which together have acted as formidable obstacles to positive government intervention in agriculture: (1) the formation of the social class structure; (2) the lack of peasant interest in politics; (3) the lack of government and upper-class identification with the peasantry; (4) the development of the economic goals of the Haitian governments.

We will begin with a description of the characteristics which traditionally have separated elite and peasants in Haiti. This description is followed by an analysis of how these differences developed out of the colonial social structure leaving, in the early 1840s, a fairly rigid class structure. The analysis then goes on to discuss the consequences of the land reforms by Pétion and Boyer, where the peasants lost all interest in national politics, and the ex-landowners simultaneously turned their back on agriculture to engage wholeheartedly in politics instead.

The latter half of the chapter traces the consequences of the separ-