

Haiti and the Politics of Containment

Review of Peter Hallward's book: *Damming the Flood: Haiti, Aristide and the Politics of Containment*

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In April, mass protests against hunger and rising food prices erupted in Haiti and led to the fall of the government. On April 18, Prime Minister Jacques Edouard Alexis resigned following a vote of non-confidence in Haiti's senate. The vote was orchestrated by some of Haiti's wealthy elite, seeking to bring the government of President René Prével more directly under their control.

The story of hunger in Haiti goes far beyond recent hikes in world food prices. The country's crushing poverty — it is the poorest country in the Americas — is the result of decades of exploitation and interference by the world's big powers, principally the United States, with Canada and France increasingly joining in.

This important new book tells that story.

A courageous twenty five-year struggle against hunger and poverty

In 1986, a popular uprising overthrew the Duvalier family dynasty, one of the most ruthless tyrannies in modern history. Four times since then, in 1990, 1995, 2000 and 2006, the Haitian people have elected governments that promised socially-progressive policies. The first three in fact encouraged and supported Haiti's peasant farmers so that the country could become food self sufficient.

Two of those governments were overthrown, in 1991 and 2004, by Haiti's elite and its foreign backers. Both times, the ousted president was Jean-Bertrand Aristide, a Catholic priest and advocate of liberation theology, now living in exile in South Africa. The U.S., Canada and France directly backed Aristide's overthrow in 2004 by sending thousands of soldiers and police to finish an assault begun by Haitian paramilitaries. The foreign intervention was sanctioned by the UN Security Council.

Peter Hallward's new book tells the tragic tale of 2004. *Damming the Flood: Haiti, Aristide and the Politics of Containment* is a hard-hitting and thoroughly-researched exposé of the international conspiracy that led to the latest overthrow of Haitian democracy and sovereignty. The "flood" in the title refers to the political movement and party, created by Aristide and his colleagues, known as "Lavalas," a word in Haiti's Kreyol language that expresses the imagery of the Biblical flood sweeping away an unjust and immoral social order.

Canadian-born Hallward is a professor of philosophy at Middlesex University in London, UK. His book, acclaimed by Noam Chomsky and Dr. Paul Farmer, themselves authors on Haiti,

systematically demolishes the lies and distortions that have been spread in the countries of the big-three conspirator governments — the U.S., Canada and France.

The conspiracy was presented as salvation for the Haitian people, as “liberation” from Aristide’s allegedly repressive government. Hallward sums up the conspiracy in these words:

“The effort to weaken, demoralize then overthrow Lavalas in the first years of the twenty-first century was perhaps the most successful exercise of neo-imperial sabotage since the toppling of Nicaragua’s Sandinistas in 1990... Not only did the coup of 2004 topple one of the most popular governments in Latin America, but it managed to topple it in a manner that wasn’t recognized as a coup at all.”

Damming the Flood describes the calamitous consequences of two years of foreign-imposed government following the 2004 overthrow, including widespread killings and jailings of Aristide supporters, economic ruin, and deepening misery for the majority of the Haitian population. The book’s narrative ends in 2007, but readers will find many keys to understanding the social calamity that continues to unfold, two and a half years after the election of René Préval in February 2006 and four and a half years after the U.S., Canada and France seized effective control of the country.

Préval has disappointed the Haitian masses who voted overwhelmingly for him. He has bowed to demands to surrender Haiti’s beleaguered economy to international capital, including privatizations of the few remaining public enterprises. He has done little to stand up to foreign police and military rampaging through the vast, poor neighbourhoods where people cling to the dream of a return of Aristide and the reform policies of his Fanmi Lavalas party.

A devastating account of ‘left’ and NGO support to imperialism

Hallward describes the array of domestic and international non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and “left” parties whose material interests and blind hostility to the post-year 2000 government of President Aristide led them into an alliance with imperialism and the Haitian elite in the 2004 coup. They supported Aristide’s overthrow and then became complicit with the massive human rights violations that followed.

The scope of this betrayal will shock many readers. Among the partners in the reactionary alliance against Lavalas are the leaders of Haiti’s failed Stalinist parties; former allies of Aristide within the Fanmi Lavalas party; the Communist Party of France; a multitude of NGOs in the U.S., France and Canada, including the not-so-alternative Montreal-based left-media NGO Alternatives; the Quebec Federation of Labour; parties of the “Socialist” International, including Canada’s New Democratic Party and France’s Socialist Party; and the political/quasi-trade union Haitian grouping known as Batay ouvriye (Workers Struggle).

Hallward also documents the silence or complicity of such agencies as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch in response to post-coup human rights violations.

Haiti today

Hallward’s book is an emotionally difficult read. It is hard to imagine that a people can survive all that has been thrown its way in Haiti — poverty, political violence, environmental

degradation, loss of political sovereignty — only to have its fate largely ignored by “progressive” world opinion. Still, the author expresses cautious optimism for the future.

As demonstrated by the remarkable events surrounding the 2006 election, the popular movements in Haiti retain a strong and defiant capacity to mobilize. New, younger leaders are moving to the fore.

And important lessons have been drawn from the Aristide years. One of the strengths of *Damming the Flood* is its recounting of Haitian rethinking about the past 25 years. Could Aristide and his movement have taken more decisive measures to counter imperialist sabotage of their social and political project?

The foreign military and political presence in Haiti, a reading of the book suggests, is weaker than surface appearance might suggest.

Hallward to speak in Montreal, Ottawa, Toronto, Vancouver

Beginning in late May, Peter Hallward, author of *Damming the Flood*, will speak in four Canadian cities in a tour organized by the Canada Haiti Action Network. Public meetings will take place in Montreal on May 31, Ottawa on June 1, Toronto on June 2, and Vancouver on June 7. Appearing with Hallward in Montreal and Ottawa will be Paul Chery, Secretary General of the Haitian Workers Confederation (CTH). Chery is one of the international guests at the convention of the Canadian Labour Congress to take place in Toronto May 25 to 30.

For details on this speaking tour, visit the website of the [Canada Haiti Action Network](#).

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