



Haiti: What Does Solidarity Really Mean?

Uncommon sense

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Mark Schuller

In early 2022, the world was still gripped by the COVID-19 pandemic. As of mid-February when this article was written, the global death toll estimate approached 6 million people (5,871,760), with the U.S. accounting for almost a million deaths (931,505).¹ Lessons the world could have learned about our shared vulnerability seemed to have gone unlearned. Both the possible commonality found in facing mortality and the practical solidarity to stop the spread of disease remain mostly unrealized. The same goes for the glimmers of a radical empathy or rallying behind humanity as a potentially unifying political subject — an anthropological imagination or anthropolitics.² These possibilities were buried in partisan politics, racial disparities and obscene levels of profiteering of an ever-shrinking yet increasingly powerful global capitalist mega-elite class.

In addition to COVID-19, the United States publicly contended with what the Association of Black Anthropologists called a “pandemic of anti-black racism”³ following the killings of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor and Ahmaud Arbery, among 226 Black people in the United States killed by state agents in 2020.⁴ The reaction to the movement and calls to “defund the police” were swift and violent, reaching a crescendo on January 6,

2021, as Congress was set to certify the results of the 2020 presidential election that President Trump lost by more than 7 million votes.

Amidst these dual pandemics, the socio-political situation in Haiti deteriorated. On February 7, 2021, President Jovenel Moïse’s term expired, according to most Haitian constitutional scholars and organizations. Defiantly staying in office, Moïse also pushed through a constitutional referendum that would centralize power in the office of the president. The violence strategically cultivated by Moïse himself and segments of the ruling class eventually came for President Moïse himself. He was assassinated in the middle of the night on July 7. Barely a month later, on August 14, two earthquakes as powerful as the 2010 seismic event that struck the capital shook the southern peninsula, which was still recovering from the destruction of 2016’s Hurricane Matthew. The next month, U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement apprehended 18,000 Haitian people at the U.S.–Mexico border, destroying their makeshift settlement at Del Rio, Texas. In October, armed groups seized control of the petroleum distribution system, triggering a weeks-long gas shortage that shut down public transport, drove up prices for primary goods, and triggered blackouts. During this shutdown, a gang kidnapped 18 missionaries, including 17 U.S. citizens.

Solidarity in times of crisis is particularly important — and fragile. As an example of this fragility, people’s literal and metaphoric “bandwidth” remains low. It is not just “compassion fatigue”; some people are unable to connect to others because the life forced on-

line reached data limits, and others lost their jobs. Students, teachers, civil servants and millions of newly unemployed struggled to come out of COVID isolation and its disruptions.

In this article, I discuss the situation in Haiti, but I also outline the importance of solidarity politics. A solidarity politics is seeing the indivisibility of justice. In part, this emphasizes the need to understand how various struggles for justice that appear at first glance to be isolated are interconnected, an anthropological imagination. This has been especially apparent in key lessons offered to me from Haitian activists and scholars about the importance of solidarity, particularly during times of crisis. Foremost among these is the acknowledgement that the *kriz konjonktirèl* (“conjunctural” or “current” crisis) is an expression of the *kriz estriktirèl* (“structural” crisis).

The Interconnectedness of Struggles

The two oldest nation states in the Western Hemisphere, Haiti and the United States, share a long and complicated history. Haitian soldiers fought alongside colonists during the American Revolution, especially at Savannah. Two years after the U.S. Constitution was ratified, enslaved African laborers revolted against slavery in what was then called Saint-Domingue. This was the French name for the colony, which they had considered the “pearl of the Antilles.” The revolt gained steam and led to the world’s first abolition of slavery in 1794, during the Jacobin period of the French Revolution. Reactionary

currents in France led to the rise of Napoleon Bonaparte, who sent his brother-in-law with 20,000 of his best troops to reinstate slavery on the island colony. Revolutionary masses in Haiti saw the necessity in driving out the French and gaining independence. They also beat back Spanish and English invasion armies. United in common cause — the motto on Haiti’s flag is *l’Union Fait la Force* (“In Unity There Is Strength”) — mixed-race and African generals joined the masses and defeated the French on November 18, 1803.

Meanwhile, the United States was put to the test, postponing direct confrontation about slavery, facing working-class rebellions and a quasi-war with European powers. The first boost in becoming “from sea to shining sea” was an agreement reached by Thomas Jefferson’s secretary of state. James Monroe was sent to France to negotiate access to the Mississippi River port of New Orleans. Having lost their most valuable possession because of the Haitian Revolution, France instead sold what is now the middle third of the continental United States, the entire Mississippi River Basin.

Far from gratitude, U.S. policy toward Haiti was punitive and aimed toward containment of the threat of revolutionary ideas of emancipation and freedom for enslaved people anywhere.⁵ Indeed, the Haitian Revolution inspired similar revolts led by Gabriel Prosser in 1800, Charles Deslondes in 1811, Denmark Vesey in 1822 and Nat Turner in 1831. The United States only formally recognized Haiti in 1863 during the Civil War that was to end slavery. The U.S. government leveraged perceived racial solidarity, naming abolitionist Frederick Douglass as emissary to Haiti in 1889. Meanwhile U.S. Navy ships

invaded Haiti 26 times following U.S. recognition until July 28, 1915, when Marines began an occupation that lasted 19 years.

This occupation centralized political and economic power in Port-au-Prince. It also opened up land for U.S. ownership and created an army. Importantly, it occurred a year after U.S. warships took Haiti's gold reserves for National City Bank. The occupation cemented Haiti's economic role as market for surplus U.S. goods and source for cheap labor, triggering a wave of international migration to support U.S. agribusiness interests in neighboring Cuba and Dominican Republic.⁶ The U.S. occupation also set into motion a neo-colonial relationship with Haiti that included support for dictator François Duvalier, particularly after the latter voted with the United States to exclude revolutionary Cuba from the Organization of American States (OAS). In 1969 the aging Duvalier negotiated with Nelson Rockefeller, U.S. envoy and future vice president, for U.S. support in keeping dissidents *out* of Haiti. U.S. backing also helped facilitate a transfer of power to Duvalier's son, then 17 years old. It was a quid pro quo for liberalization of Haiti's economy to benefit U.S. corporate interests and for permission for U.S. missionary groups to enter Haiti.⁷

Soon after 19-year-old Jean-Claude Duvalier took office in 1971, he embraced free trade zones to benefit U.S. apparel companies, promising to turn Haiti into the "Taiwan of the Caribbean." Following a brief liberalization of press and assembly to present the appearance of human rights, embraced by U.S. President Jimmy Carter (1977–1981) and Pope John Paul II, Duvalier agreed to the U.S. plan to eradicate the local pig population after an outbreak of swine fever in the

Dominican Republic. Since pigs represented "bank accounts" for peasant families, this plan was Haiti's "great stock market crash."⁸ Duvalier faced a growing opposition.

On February 7, 1986, undermining this growing democratic movement, the United States installed a three-person military junta to replace Duvalier. At the behest of the United States, the junta named two "Chicago Boy" economists trained by Milton Friedman to impose neoliberal policies such as lowering tariffs, opening markets, privatizing state utilities, reducing social spending, deepening Haiti's dependence on sweatshops and floating the currency.

Just as during the 1915 occupation, these U.S.-imposed economic policies impoverished Haitian farmers and had a series of consequences, including internal and external migration.⁹ With their livelihoods destroyed, Haitian farmers and their families swelled the cities and fled the country on makeshift boats. Port-au-Prince's population quadrupled in the following 2 decades,¹⁰ overtaxing the urban infrastructure.¹¹ Housing this generation became highly problematic. Families constructed their own one-room shelters in swelling shantytowns with little to no public services.

U.S. foreign policy of both Republican and Democratic administrations from the 1980s onward centered on what for-profit U.S. media termed "boat people," a racist term referring to Haitian migrants. The U.S. response was immediate interdiction and deportation or sending people to private prisons or the military base in Guantánamo Cuba and other "states of exception."¹² Activist Ninaj Raoul argued that this was hypocritical in two ways.¹³ First, the treatment of Black Haitian

migrants contrasts sharply with that of white-majority Cubans in the “wet foot/dry foot” policy that granted automatic permanent residency for Cubans. Second, migration is a logical outcome of the human desperation caused by U.S. policy in the first place.

Structured by the long legacy of plantation slavery and global racial capitalism, this combination of neoliberal policies imposed by the United States and racist immigration policies led to a steady decline in living conditions in Haiti. Haiti is simultaneously the most open economy in the hemisphere as well as the poorest and the most unequal. This ensemble of human-created conditions rendered Haiti as a country, as well as individual families, more vulnerable to disaster events.¹⁴ For example, depending on the index, Haiti is either at the top or among the top five countries most vulnerable to climate change. In turn, each disaster event — whether natural phenomena such as earthquakes and hurricanes or conflicts such as coups d’état — was an opportunity for further deepening neoliberal capitalism.¹⁵

2021 Crises as Political Aftershocks

The multiple crises that Haitian people experienced in 2021 were political aftershocks of the January 12, 2010, earthquake. The 7.0-magnitude temblor with an epicenter 30 kilometers south of Port-au-Prince destroyed many houses, schools, hospitals, government buildings and roads. Official estimates of the human death toll ranged from 230,000 to 316,000, but the actual number is unknown.¹⁶ An alarming number of houses

were turned to rubble or structurally damaged. This, combined with nongovernmental organization (NGO) policies and the fact that a large majority of residents were renters, pushed people into internally displaced persons (IDP) camps. At the peak of the crisis, an estimated 1.5 million people out of a population of around 9 million lived in IDP camps. The earthquake struck during Barack Obama’s first year as U.S. president. In a *Newsweek* article published January 14, 2 days after the earthquake, Obama promised that responding to the disaster would be a priority for his administration. He outlined what could be called the Obama doctrine: “When we show not just our power, but our compassion, the world looks to us with a mixture of awe and admiration.”

Overseeing the U.S. response was the world’s preeminent power couple, Bill and Hillary Clinton, whom Jonathan Katz dubbed the “King and Queen of Haiti.” Bill had already been named UN Special Envoy in 2009, following a report by economist Paul Collier, who had spent mere days in the country. Bill was simultaneously the president of the Clinton Global Initiative, and Hillary was U.S. secretary of state. Following the earthquake, foreign donors asked the Haitian parliament to dissolve itself to make way for the Interim Haiti Reconstruction Commission that Bill Clinton co-chaired. Long a favored target of right-wing media, the Clintons’ dealings in Haiti found their way into the U.S. presidential election. In addition to aid contracts going to Clinton donors,¹⁷ the Clintons’ disaster capitalism included promotion of apparel factories,¹⁸ high-end tourism¹⁹ and mining²⁰ in areas far outside those impacted by the earthquake.

One obstacle to the Clintons' plans was then-Haitian President René Préal. The U.S. government had viewed Préal with suspicion because he was an associate of twice-deposed President Jean-Bertrand Aristide and because he inaugurated bilateral cooperation agreements with Cuba and Venezuela. Following Haiti's constitution, Préal's term was set to expire on February 7, 2011. OAS representative Ricardo Seitenfus detailed — and, by his accounts, prevented — a coup attempt led by Hillary Clinton.²¹ Having failed at this, the Clintons' next move was to reverse the outcome of the election, held when over a million people still lived in IDP camps. This U.S. interference into Haitian politics resulted in popular carnival singer Michel Martelly advancing to the second round. He won easily.

A newcomer to politics with only one member of parliament in his heretofore unknown political party, Martelly had the unwavering support of the Clintons and, therefore, the international community. This diplomatic and financial assistance empowered Martelly to systematically consolidate his power. He installed loyalist mayors, failed to hold elections and thus allowed parliament's term to expire. All of these moves, in turn, gave Martelly unchecked power to govern by decree. Coupled with this, nearly all foreign assistance went to high-profile projects such as those noted above, supported by the Clintons and clientelist political patronage, securing a voter base. Even the South-South solidarity project of Petrocaribe, funded by Venezuelan oil, followed this troubling pattern.²²

Haitian feminist/sociologist Sabine Lamour denounced the toxic masculinist violence in Martelly's ruling PHTK (or "baldhead") political party.²³ Martelly used all of these tools

to attempt to push through the election of his late-chosen successor, also a newcomer to politics. Jovenel Moïse, called the "banana man" because of his mostly failed export agribusiness venture with USAID funding, was named victor in a foreign-financed election founded on fraud. While quickly endorsed by the so-called Core Group (the United States, France, OAS, Brazil and the European Union), the evidence of fraud was too great to ignore, and the Haitian electoral commission called for annulling the election. The interim government was determined to hold the replacement elections without foreign financing, but category 4 Hurricane Matthew intervened in October 2016. This disaster provided the opportunity for patronage and opened the door for foreign financing.²⁴ The Core Group demanded that elections be held. And so they were, six weeks after the hurricane, while tens of thousands of people were still without shelter and nearly all voting centers in two provinces — mostly schools — remained either damaged or repurposed as emergency shelters. Moïse won with the lowest voter turnout in Haitian history, taking office on February 7, 2017.

Following his limited and contested mandate, Moïse faced general revolt a year and a half after taking office. On July 6, 2018, during the World Cup quarterfinal, the government announced a gas hike imposed by the International Monetary Fund. People all around the country declared *peyi lòk* — general strike (literally "locked country"), blocking roads and all commerce for 2 days. This forced the government to back down. Moïse's first prime minister resigned. Within five weeks, a social media challenge

demanded #KòtKòbPetwoKaribeA? (“Where are the Petrocaribe funds?”) Intensifying tactics included *peyi lòk* and mass mobilization, including a nationwide protest during which organizers counted more than 2 million participants. (At this point, the population of Haiti was 10 million.) Despite this, Moïse remained in power. He inherited Martelly’s support from the Core Group and armed groups that outsiders lump together and refer to as “gangs.” Haitian scholar Djems Olivier detailed the ways NGOs supported these gangs and their federation, what he called the “archipelization of violence.”²⁵ Particularly troubling to Haitian activists and human rights groups was a wave of massacres, targeting low-income neighborhoods where opponents to Moïse and PHTK lived. One of the first and most visible was in Lasalin, on November 13, 2018, where Haitian human rights group Réseau National de Défense des Droits Humains (RNDDH) counted 71 people killed. This was widely considered an underestimate.²⁶

Trump was key to keeping Moïse and PHTK in power. Trump and his media allies played up the Clintons’ disaster capitalism, targeting the Florida Haitian community in 2016. An example of this is a bold headline published in *Breitbart News* on election day: “Haiti’s Revenge: Haitian Americans in Position to Exact Revenge on Clintons by Delivering Florida to Trump.” Whether on their own or aided by the propaganda, Haitian voter turnout was low, and a larger portion of Haitian voters voted against the Democrats than in other elections and other Black voters.²⁷ Trump won Florida and its 29 electoral college votes and the presidency. In January 2019, Moïse sided with Trump

to exclude Venezuela from the OAS, thus breaking a bilateral cooperation that began in 1815 when Haitian President Alexandre Pétion offered sanctuary to a besieged Simón Bolívar. Bolstered with Haitian troops, food, arms and money, Bolívar went on to liberate what is now Venezuela and much of South America from Spain. In March 2019, Moïse was among the Caribbean leaders who met Trump at Mar-a-Lago, where Trump promised investment to reward the leaders for their loyalty.

Moïse did not rely solely on Trump to stay in power. Trump abandoned Syrian Kurds fighting against ISIS, a broadly reported move that drew considerable criticism. In this geopolitical environment, it is not surprising that Moïse deepened his reliance on gangs, who federated into an organization they called the Group of 9, or G9. Concomitantly, charismatic former police officer Jimmy “Barbecue” Cherizier became a visible spokesperson for the G9, organizing rallies in support of the president, as in February 2021 when Moïse held on after his term expired. As many Haitian activists have pointed out, arms are not produced in Haiti and therefore must be imported from abroad, either by sea or from the Dominican Republic, despite formal prohibitions of the arms trade and official sanctions. Many in Haiti hold the United States responsible for, at the very least, a double standard and a leaky embargo, if not outright complicity in the so-called war on drugs. Like his predecessor, Moïse was granted authoritarian powers when parliament’s terms expired on January 13, 2020, a day after the 10-year anniversary of the earthquake. Moïse’s decrees included criminalizing forms of protest and forming an intelligence agency.

Biden Our Time: Moving Beyond Allyship

Trump drew the ire of the Haitian American electorate after his 2018 comments that Haiti was a “shithole country.” Many had hoped that Biden would keep his campaign promises and change U.S. policy toward Haiti and immigration. Riding on goodwill for being Obama’s vice president, Biden edged out contenders in a decisive showing in South Carolina, whose Democratic primary voters are overwhelmingly Black. In a surprising upset, Black voters organized by former gubernatorial candidate Stacey Abrams, among others, handed not only Georgia’s electoral votes to Biden but the U.S. Senate, sending two Democrats to Washington. Haitian American groups’ contribution to the effort in Florida was blunted by high turnout from an aging white retiree population in the state where Trayvon Martin’s killer walked free and the Ku Klux Klan is headquartered.

Like his three Democratic predecessors, Haiti provided Biden an early opportunity to define his foreign policy. Instead, in the words of Haitian activists, Biden took a free ride on Trump’s coattails, showing support for Moïse despite his authoritarian rule and the growing opposition to it. While reauthorizing Temporary Protected Status for Haitian people, the Biden administration kept Steven Miller’s xenophobic use of Title 42, using COVID as a pretext for deportation. Biden’s support for Moïse was particularly striking, given that a broad base of groups spanning socioeconomic classes and political orientations had carefully built a civil society forum and later the Commission in Search of a Hai-

tian Solution to the Crisis. As of December 2021, more than 600 Haitian organizations had ratified the August 30, 2021, “Montana Accord” asserting and reclaiming national sovereignty to define a transition plan and elect a transition team.

Having empowered armed territorial groups to commit violence to maintain his power base, Moïse was thus responsible for the rise in kidnapping and violence. RNDDH investigated 13 paramilitary massacres from 2018 to mid-2021, wherein 487 people were murdered and 129 “disappeared.”²⁸ In addition, RNDDH documented 33 rapes and 679 children who became orphans. On June 23, 2021, “Barbecue” proclaimed the start of a revolution the same day that René Sylvestre, Moïse’s constitutional successor as head of Haiti’s supreme court, died of COVID. A week later, human rights activist Antoinette Duclair and journalist Diego Charles were murdered along with 15 others in a midnight attack. The OAS demanded change, and Moïse announced his seventh prime minister, Ariel Henry. Moïse was also killed in the middle of the night, precisely 1 week later, on July 7, the day Henry was set to take office. Investigations later revealed that Henry was in direct contact with assassination suspects.²⁹

In the midst of this institutional void, the August 14 earthquakes were as powerful as that which destroyed Port-au-Prince 11 years prior. An estimated 800,000 people were affected, 2,200 people lost their lives and 139,000 homes were destroyed or seriously damaged. Solidarity initiatives from local communities across Haiti provided emergency medical care, food, water and assistance rebuilding.³⁰

Haitian filmmaker Raoul Peck coined the term “fatal assistance” to describe the international failures of the response to the 2010 earthquake.³¹ Attempting to apply lessons learned from these failures, Dr. Jerry Chandler of the (Haitian) National Directorate of Civil Protection was given a primary, visible role in responding to the 2021 disaster. Despite this and the humanitarian “grand bargain” that promised localization of humanitarian aid, including specific targets for funding, local organizations were still left behind, not adequately resourced and not given decision-making roles. Notably, the emergency \$187-million UN appeal represented just a little more than 1 percent of the aid pledged after 2010.

Amid these complex crises, within a month, 18,000 Haitian people came to the U.S. border via South America. Following Brazil’s and Chile’s leadership roles in the UN military mission following the second ouster of Aristide in 2004, these two countries and others provided space for Haitian migrants. Both countries had left-leaning governments at the time, and Brazil faced a labor shortage for infrastructure development in advance of the 2014 World Cup and 2016 Olympics. When the games were over, particularly after extreme right-wing Jair Bolsonaro was elected president in 2018, Haitian migrants began to face increasing white supremacist and xenophobic hostility.

This racism was exposed to the entire world when a photo of U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement agents on horseback whipping a black Haitian man, Mirard Joseph, went viral. Scores of U.S. social movement organizations spanning a range of causes and generations issued statements of

protest, and some, including the Family Advocacy Network Movement, held in-person demonstrations. The Haitian Bridge Alliance joined Justice Action Center to sue the Biden administration on behalf of Joseph and others denied due process. In this context, Miami voters elected their first Haitian representative to congress, Sheila Cherfilus-McCormick.

None of this deterred the Biden administration, even after February 7, 2022, the date Moïse claimed as the end of his term and the deadline U.S. officials gave for a transition to begin. As of this writing, nearly all of the people detained at the border since September 2021 have been deported to a country that the U.S. government deems unsafe for U.S. citizens.³² It is among the fastest purges in U.S. history, with Biden deporting almost as many Haitians in his first year (20,000) than the previous three presidents over 20 years.³³ The double standard speaks volumes about the value of Haitian people, who have been denied their humanity, and how little Haitian or Black lives matter to even Democratic administrations. The so-called centrist logic of the high-level Democrats who control the party and administration includes pitching to people they consider to be “swing” voters — whom they imagine as white — as the way to stay in office. This conveniently or deliberately forgets the lessons that Obama and Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now (ACORN) showed in 2008 or Abrams showed in Georgia in 2020. At the core is a deep-seated conception that some people’s lives do not count, a legacy of dehumanization of plantation slavery that the United States is still reckoning with.

In other words, there has been no perceived political cost. Now more than ever it

is important that anthropologists and solidarity activists move beyond the comfort zone of NGOing. Being right or invoking human rights has not stopped these atrocities. We need to be part of the vital movements in the United States, making connections and mobilizing as if our lives depend on it, because they do. And, if our solidarity is to mean anything, as movement actors we need to move beyond being performative “allies” and act as “accomplices,” changing the calculus and putting our own bodies on the line to disrupt white supremacist state policy.

Note that I did not say “foreign” policy. The multifaceted crisis calls for solidarity between groups working on different issues, seeing the intimate connection between immigration and anti-Blackness, and anti-Haitianism in particular.³⁴ Haiti is in many real ways the ongoing foil for U.S. white supremacy, as well as a warning for the real human costs of global racial capitalism. Lessons from Haitian understandings of the interconnection of seemingly distant crises are urgently needed right now.

Notes

Please see <https://www.anthropolitics.org/anthropologynow.htm> for accompanying photo essay.

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34. James Darbouze, “Trapped in the Imperial Grip,” *NACLA Report on the Americas* 53, no. 1 (2021), 37–42; Mamyrah Dougé-Prosper, “An Island in the Chain,” *NACLA Report on the Americas* 53, no. 1 (2021), 30–36.

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