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Controlled misunderstandings - Haitian perceptions of UN missions

Abstract

Over the past century Haiti has experienced successive international interventions in the name of peace. By alleging that Haiti's internal instability threatens international security, the United Nations (UN) has undertaken peace operations in the country and installed administrative apparatuses to guarantee the proper functioning of democratic institutions, assessed by institutionally established criteria. This ethnographic analysis of one of the peace operations in Haiti – MINUSTAH – explores how the data production on the levels of violence builds an intervention-legitimizing consensus that mobilizes an international bureaucratic apparatus, whose role is to produce even more data. Empirical evidence from fieldwork among UN experts and Haitian activists suggest a mismatch between the Haiti inscribed in UN documents and the Haiti reiterated in local stories about the nation. By contrasting the production of 'official history' as a truth and 'unofficial' Haitian narratives, I will shed light on the relations of power involved in the enactment of historical facts. What the UN defines as a deterioration in the economic and social condition, Haitians conceive as a loophole with revolutionary potential to change the system. Such contrast leads towards a critical analysis of Western positivist notions such as progress, development, democracy, human rights, and freedom as the ultimate principles that UN peace operations pursue. By following Michel-Rolph Trouillot's proposal, I bring together two historiographical traditions – Haitian and foreign –, as a means to "make silences speak" and create new narratives about international interventions in Haiti in the early 21st century.

Introduction

Over the past century, Haiti has experienced successive international interventions in the name of peace. By alleging that Haiti's internal instability threatens international security, the

United Nations (UN) has undertaken peace operations in the country and installed an administrative network to guarantee what they considered the proper functioning of democratic institutions, assessed by institutionally established criteria.

The Mission des Nations Unies pour la Stabilisation en Haïti (MINUSTAH) was the last militarized peace operation in Haitian territory in 2004. During the thirteen years of the operation, the UN published hundreds of official documents on the planning, monitoring, and evaluation matters. Through other venues, sectors of Haitian society were also publishing documents expressing their frustration regarding the foreign interference in the country and reporting the arbitrary nature of the UN mission.

CLR James (1938) already pointed out that since the Revolution, Haitian perspectives have held divergent tactical and strategic positions that trigger internal rifts and disputes. Being a constitutive part of Haitian society, different social classes expressed different thoughts regarding the international apparatus that occupies the country. In favor of the mission were the NGOs and the UN agencies, with foreign and Haitian employees, who were mostly part of an *educated upper-class* with the power and influence on decision-making in the country. Against MINUSTAH were the social movements organized contrarily to foreign oppression. Both sectors announce their commitment to the emancipation and development of Haiti, yet they hold different methods to achieve these goals.

I intend to argue that social movements of resistance to international interference actualize the Haitian Revolution as a language of power in their current actions and claims. Furthermore, I expect to point out how the bureaucratic machine of international missions operates silencing devices to demobilize and delegitimize such movements, keeping them in the realm of the *unthinkable*. The international community takes the Haitian acts of resistance as signals that this is an ungovernable country, therefore it should be under constant monitoring. Nevertheless, as I aim to suggest here, the protests reveal the inefficiency of the international community to establish an effective dialogue and cooperation within the different classes of Haitian society.

The data regarding the Haitian social situation are produced to feed narratives that are intended to build the consensus required to legitimize UN interventions. Michel-Rolph Trouillot (1995) has shown how power precedes narratives and produces silences in History. The author inquires "what makes some narratives rather than others powerful enough to pass as accepted history if not historicity itself?". To compose another narrative of the Haitian Revolution, the author engaged in archival work in order to juxtapose the political climate at that time, the writings of historians, and elements of world history. In this

presentation, inspired by the author's proposal and his method, I intend to highlight other narratives – those of the Haitian social movement – that do not have the same success in becoming official. This approach leads towards a critical analysis of Western positivist notions such as peace, development, democracy, and human rights as the ultimate principles that UN operations pursue.

Stepping into Haitian terrain

I first arrived in Port-au-Prince on October 17, 2018, when large demonstrations blocked the streets against alleged corruption of the Jovenel Moise government in the PetroCaribe funds, a cooperation agreement with Venezuela to supply gas and oil in Haiti. As I left the airport on the back of a motorcycle, I could see the signs of the protests that had just happened. The rider zigzagged through the stones scattered on the asphalt, barricades of garbage and burning tires. I arrived at my accommodation and started talking about the demonstration with a neighbor who was excitedly showing me pictures and videos that she was getting from friends on her phone. At the very beginning of the conversation, I realized that the scenario I watched earlier could fill the description of Haiti as a *violent* country, as it is portrayed in the official documents. However, that scenario revealed other ways of doing politics inspired by a particular narrative of resistance and revolution.

At that moment, a year had passed since the official end of MINUSTAH. Another neighbor said that the country was going through a political crisis that the UN had not been able to avoid or solve. I then asked what would be the role of the international cooperation there. He replied: "None!! Haiti has its internal conflicts, I know, but Haiti will find a solution. We were the first country to make a slave revolution and get our independence in the West. We know what to do alone. "

The idea that "Haiti will manage it on its own" is what makes the Haitian protests be seen on the one side as signs of disorder and international threat, and on the other, as a genuine form of political manifestation, which is analogous to the Haitian Revolution ideals that have always been repeated in the narratives of social movements. The demonstrations that hit the streets evoked forms of expressions that had nothing to do with a disorder. If there were any instabilities, they were prior to the protests that, indeed, also demanded the re-establishment of the order. But not exactly that one aimed at by the international organizations. This is what I will look at in the following sections.

Revolution – past and future in the Haitian present

To deal with the legacies of MINUSTAH from the Haitian perspective, I first analyzed the dozens of documents from social movements that expressed complaints about the Mission. Next, I contacted Didier Dominique and Oxygène David, two important leaderships with long political and activist experience in Port-au-Prince. They signed most of the documents I read. It is worth noting that they brought the Haitian perspective from the working-class against the bourgeoisie. Locating these points of view is essential as it helps to decentralize the idea of the Haitian perspective as if it was homogeneous, and allows us to expose the contrasts of social classes in the country.

It is also worth emphasizing that the activists presented a historical description that comes close to a critical historiography, which I want to draw attention to here. Didier started an examination of the economic and social formation of Haiti highlighting how the repressive apparatus has always been under external domination, in order to keep Haiti, as he said, at the service of the imperialist powers. For David, the UN forces were in the country to suppress any popular uprising against exploitation and poverty. MINUSTAH was only another war against the poor.

Didier stated that the Haitian Revolution could bear that name because it fostered ruptures in the existing logic of capital accumulation and political order based on the labor of enslaved black people. At the end of so many battles, however, the country was devastated and deprived of productive capital. The newly freed people developed a small-scale production in the mountains. A new ruling class, on the other hand, reproduced the logic of exploitation and exported the scarce amount of what they could produce.

Oxygène David recalls that even after independence, the country suffered from consecutive international occupations. The first one was in 1915, by the USA, and lasted 19 years. After that, François Duvalier, known as Papa Doc, ran a campaign based on nationalist and revolutionary notions, evoking these elements of disruption to reach power. He got elected in 1957. However, Didier pointed out that Papa Doc did not promote any ruptures, rather, he forged closer ties with the US to block the influence of Cuban communism in the Caribbean. Duvalier organized the Tonton Macoute, an extremely violent armed group, and installed a dictatorship. After Papa Doc's death, his son Jean Claude Duvalier, aka Baby Doc, took over as president, promising to carry out what he called ‘economic revolution’, which was nothing more than the insertion of Haiti into neoliberalism.

Didier presents a critical view on how the country got into the international market: by offering cheap labor as a strategic advantage for foreign investments. The situation of extreme poverty, added to the lack of state capacity to supply basic services to the population, shaped an untenable situation. Despite the extreme violence of the Tonton Macoute, a popular uprising brought back the meaning of Revolution as a rupture with an oppressive system and got rid of the long dictatorship in Haiti at the end of the 80s. According to David, the 1987 Constitution celebrated the democratic pact.

Jean-Bertrand Aristide was the first president elected in 1990. He was a former priest aligned with liberation theology and he had strong ties to grassroots organizations. According to Didier, due to the progressive reforms that Aristide was trying to implement, he suffered a coup in his first year in power and was forced to leave the country. Aristide's ouster happened one day after his epic speech when he brought out nationalist features such as the flag, the language (Creole), and the Revolution, calling the Haitian people to fight against any threat to the newly established democracy in the country.

Because of several popular demonstrations for his return, a mission headed by the USA, Canada, and France was deployed in 1993. This was the second foreign occupation, in David's narrative. Aristide flew back to Haiti in 1994 to finish his term, and still managed to elect his ally, Renè Preval, in the following elections.

In 2000, Aristide was elected again. However, allegations of corruption fueled by the opposition led to a political crisis. In February 2004, he suffered a new *coup* and was forced to leave the office *and* the country again. The extreme polarization between his allies and his opponents created an environment that the international community once again considered *unstable*, and months later MINUSTAH was deployed. David considered that this *was* the third external occupation in the country. He mentioned that the 1987 Constitution does not allow foreign soldiers to step into the Haitian terrain. Thus, he said, the UN was violating the principle of sovereignty by putting its troops in the country.

In spelling out the meaning of each letter of the acronym MINUSTAH, David called attention to "stabilization" and explained that this is not an action verb, because it does not promote real changes. Rather, he explains, *to stabilize* means "to change the social structures that cause suffering in the population – such as misery, hunger, and thirst." But MINUSTAH did not do the stabilization that Haitians expected. On the contrary, it supported the far-right political classes, promoted huge massacres in the poorest neighborhoods, especially those where Aristide supporters lived in, and influenced the electoral process in 2010 and 2016.

Didier and David debunk the success narratives of the operation published by the UN. For them, the few services that MINUSTAH carried out, such as cleaning canals, garbage collection, and road repairs, although essential, did not promote structural changes. Instead, by being complicit with the corruption of the ruling classes, the peace operation has become another oppressive force.

It is interesting to note that what the UN defines as a *deterioration* in the economic and social condition, activists conceive as a loophole with a revolutionary potential. According to Didier, international leaders frightened by this possibility try to block Haiti's influence over the entire Caribbean. Thus, more important than re-telling the events of recent history, I shed light on how historical narratives, especially those related to the Haitian Revolution, remain as relevant elements for the current political action of the activists.

The demonstrations that I witnessed in Port-au-Prince and the many others that happened afterwards, which I have been following through social networks and messages from Haitian friends, have always brought out the signals of the dissatisfaction with the Haitian government and the international cooperation. They have criticized the UN system for being complicit in the abuses of the Haitian National Police, trained during the MINUSTAH mandate, that criminalizes the population's acts of resistance.

The recent protests, like those of the past, called for the change of the President since the person that was holding the office no longer represented people’s interests. And the protesters have required the right to do so by voting. Haitian democracy, then, is not weak, as it has been portrayed by international organizations. Instead, it is undermined by external forces that do not stop interfering in the country. In the past, Haitians claimed the complete realization of the concepts of *freedom and equality*. They are now calling for the consummation of democracy in its fullest sense: a government ruled by the Haitian people. However, international cooperation insists on underestimating these capacities, keeping them in the field of the *unthinkable*.

New forms of silencing

After my field research in Port-au-Prince, I have been to the UN headquarters in New York to interview two bureaucrats who worked in MINUSTAH. After listening carefully about their bureaucratic routines, I tried to go *beyond* the institutional context. I asked about the relevance of Haitian public opinion, especially the more negative ones, regarding the operation. I mentioned meetings and documents that reported the harms caused by

MINUSTAH, including troop violence, cases of sexual abuse and exploitation, and the Cholera outbreak. One of the technicians said: "I believe that this is not a matter of public opinion. Anyone who felt harmed by the Mission, could present the complaint to the UN, with as much evidence as possible, and the Board of Investigation would verify the credibility of the case and then address reparation, if necessary." That means the UN only recognizes the complaints that come in through its institutional channels. The movements that flooded the streets, the letters addressed to the international leaders, or the countless petitions signed by the Haitian and foreign supporters, none of these would be taken as valid if they did not arrive through an institutional door, which is very difficult for any civilian to access.

Trouillot points out that in the process of producing history one must devise "formulas for repressing the *unthinkable* and bringing it back into the acceptable discourse." The perspectives of social movements outlined here show that Haitian narratives that strive for a rupture of the system are still alive. However, the UN intervenes to prevent such ruptures, introducing control mechanisms and institutional networks that are also intended to produce a historical narrative that succeeds in becoming official and ends up silencing the Haitian one.

Although the Haitian Revolution has already left the field of the *unthinkable*, the international community activates several *silencing devices* every time a new threat of insurgency arises. Therefore, the peace, as run by the UN, also works as a long-standing strategy to keep as an isolated fact everything that seems inconceivable, since "to recognize the resistance of the masses would be to recognize flaws in the system" in Trouillot words.

Conclusion – standing for another History

There is a huge mismatch between the narratives produced by UN technicians and by Haitian activists about the country's past and also concerning what is intended for its future. When contrasting both narratives, what emerges is more than a disparity between the hierarchical and politically unequal positions. These different temporalities – of the UN and the Haitians – shed light on diverse representations of Haitian time and space. Koselleck (1985) calls ‘space of experience’ the past perceived as more than memory; and ‘horizon of expectations’, the future conceived as more than hope. The author deals with these scales of time and space to move away from the positivist notion of progress, offering an alternative means to compose History. In the Haitian context, as I argue, the idea of the Revolution is what maintains the strength and coherence of both scales.

Looking at what constitutes the *space of experience* and the *horizon of expectations* of the activists in Haiti and of the technicians in the UN allows us to elaborate a historical analysis beyond the obvious contrast between these perspectives. This analysis highlights the Haitian criticism of the Western notions such as freedom, democracy, and development pursued by the UN apparatus. By following Michel-Rolph Trouillot's proposal, I brought together two historiographical traditions – Haitian and foreign – as a means to "make silences speak" and create new narratives about international interventions in Haiti in the early 21st century.

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