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*The Prophet and Power: Jean-Bertrand Aristide, the
International Community, and Haiti* (review)

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The expulsion of Jean-Claude Duvalier from the reigns of political power in Haiti in 1986 ended the Duvalier dictatorship and opened a new era in the history of Haiti. The early years of the post-Duvalier period were characterized by the presence of an imposing popular movement aiming at the eradication of the conditions of inequality and oppression that had been sustained by the combined involvement of the dictatorship and the Haitian ruling class, and by rise of Catholic priest Jean-Bertrand Aristide to the leadership of that movement. *The Prophet and Power* is a meticulously researched text making sense of the three lustrums that followed, from the election of Aristide as president of Haiti in 1990 to his banishing from the Haitian political scene in 2004.

Dupuy enjoys a high standing for his serious scholarship in the field of Haitian studies. He is the author of two important works on the political economy of Haiti in its relationship with the world system (Dupuy 1987; 1997). This book is an account of a confusing period in the contemporary political life of Haiti, the social forces informing the struggle for the control of the State, and the failure of the charismatic priest turned politician to sustain the aims of democracy and social justice that were central for the Haitian masses since the mid-1980s.

As with his other works, Dupuy's argument is centered in two key analytical ingredients that he sets forth in the first two chapters. Chapter 1, "Globalization, the 'New World Order Imperialism,' and Haiti," is an analysis of the historical connections of Haiti to the world capitalist system and its international community of actors; Chapter 2, "Before Aristide: Class Power, State Power, and the Duvalier Dictatorships, 1957-1990," examines the relationship between social classes and the state in historical perspective. As the author shows, since the early years of political activity, when the prophet was committed to an egalitarian society, he was immediately confronted by the legacy of what he calls the "prebendary state" in Haiti, which has been historically more concerned with benefiting a fraction of the ruling class through state corruption than with its sustaining role in the process of private capital accumulation. The four remaining chapters chart the ascent and downfall

of the prophet: (3) "The Prophet Armed: The Popular Movement for democracy and the Rise of Jean-Bertrand Aristide;" (4) "The Prophet Disarmed: The First Lavalas Government and Its Overthrow;" (5) "The Prophet Checkmated: The Political Opposition and the Low-Intensity War Against Aristide;" (6) "The Prophet Banished: The Second Overthrow of Aristide and the pacification of Haiti." The book also includes an extensive list of references.

For Dupuy, the political arena in Haiti following the departure of Jean Claude Duvalier in 1986 involved the struggle of various social forces and political actors with distinct political objectives. First and foremost, the Duvalierist and neo Duvalierist forces in their attempt to provide continuity to the dictatorship through the repression of the mass movement that emerged as a result of the dismantling of the Duvalierist state and the imposition of a military rule. Second, the author identifies a social force, formed by Haitian entrepreneurs embracing the *Washington Consensus* that promoted the neo-liberal outlook of the international financial institutions based in Washington during the early 1980s (such as the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, the Inter-American Development Bank), who sought an opportunity to insert Haiti in the logic of laissez faire capitalist economics. Third, the popular movement that emerged in the 1980s from the dispossessed classes in their struggle for democracy and equality. Moreover, the author argues that the struggle that took place over the transformation of the State in Haiti after the fall of Duvalier manifested two distinct conceptions of democracy: a *minimalist* version, advocating the traditional political rights ingrained in liberal conceptions of democracy, and the *maximalist* conception of democracy, promoting redistributive rights aiming at social and economic equality.

There is little consensus in both political and academic circles regarding the story of Jean Bertrand Aristide. Some authors emphasize the obstacles that he confronted in his effort to promote equality and political participation of the poor. Others tend to stress his failure to transcend the logic of the Duvalierist state, soon abandoning the objectives that led him during the period before the first coup and falling victim of authoritarian state practices relying on corruption, brutality, and terrorization as a means of holding to power. In this book Dupuy is able to move beyond such less elaborated judgments of the relationship between Aristide and the structure of political power in Haiti, analyzing the intricate set of sociological conditions that led to Aristide's rise to power by an avalanche of mass support in the 1990s, his fall by a *coup d'Etat* after seven months in power, the initiation of a period of struggle that both increased the intervention of foreign actors in the Haitian scene and disbanded the popular movement, and the weakening of the

powerful liberationist rhetoric that was a trademark in Aristide's communication with the masses.

The author sees a significant break in Aristide's political life, representing two distinct periods: an era of bonding between the leader and the masses in which the tenets of liberation theology played a fundamental role in both the construction of political program and mass mobilization, and another phase, beginning after his return from exile in the United States in 1994, when Aristide moved away from the foundational beliefs and practices in assuming the role of an authoritarian leader supporting non democratic policies. It is in those two settings of contradictory interests and political practices that Dupuy examines the story of Aristide, the prophet of the masses, confronted with the logic of political power in Haiti.

He weights the intervention of the international community and its agents to constraint the early Aristide effort to make use of his massive popular support and his control of the State to promote redistributive policies. But he also identifies key failures in Aristide's leadership, such as his inability to consolidate a strong and organized movement capable of backing his policies in the midst of strong opposition from both internal and external forces and his transformation from trusted prophet to "an-all-to-ordinary and traditional president who, like all the others who came before him, was using state power for his and his allies' personal gains" (p. 170).

In his assessment of the political discourse that oriented the rise and the fall of Aristide, Dupuy examines the relationship between his religious beliefs and his visions of an egalitarian society. The author considers that his identification with liberation theology represented an important contradiction. For one, it assisted Aristide in articulating a political discourse that imagined a better world for the poor of Haiti. But that same set of religious beliefs sparked the confrontation with the Catholic Church hierarchy and led him along the path of messianism, and to his eventual failure in building a durable mass movement.

The author also considers the difficult terrain in which Aristide moved during his early years of political activity, having to face the opposition of the Haitian bourgeoisie, distrustful of his leadership, and the United States, who shaped its policy towards Haiti under the premises of the post-Cold War "New World Order imperialism." Given these stumbling blocks and the threat of Duvalierist forces, the author reasons that Aristide could have only been successful had he been able to neutralize the business elites.

The author also explores the relationship between Aristide and the broad array of political organizations that formed the Lavalas movement that propelled Aristide to power. As the author considers the

problem of political authority and charisma, he sees the early Aristide torn between his messianic belief in a direct relationship between himself and the impoverished people whose will he incarnated, and his need of a political organization to reach power through the electoral process. This antagonism, nourished by his suspicious attitudes towards the dynamics of political organization, concluded with the dispersion of the broad Lavalas movement after his return from exile in 1994, the formation of the opposition political party *Organisation Politique Lavalas*, and the creation by Aristide of his own political organization, *Fanmi Lavalas* (The Lavalas Family), gradually abandoning the liberationist discourse that informed his earlier utopia of the poor and attempting to appeal to the masses through populist clientelism.

In his discussion of the factors that contributed to the demise of Aristide, Dupuy analyses his speeches, and his subtle justification of violence as a means of intimidating the Haitian bourgeoisie and the political opposition to his rule. The author concludes that the goals underneath the promotion of violence was to strengthen "his and his party's power and preserve the prebendary and clientelistic characteristics of the state he had vowed to dismantle in 1991, [relying on] armed gangs, the police, and authoritarian practices to suppress his opponents, all the while cultivating a self-serving image as defender of the poor" (p. xv).

He also joins the debate on whether Aristide had a direct role in the creation of armed groups known as *chimès* which terrorized Haiti during the crisis preceding his downfall and in their role during the latter part of the Aristide period making less compelling distinctions between the Tontons Makout that operated under the Duvalier dictatorships and the *chimès* that terrorized the population under Aristide. Dupuy proposes that while the former were structurally connected with the Haitian military and the dictator, *chimès* were a convenient political force of disaffected youth operating within the less formal organization of *Fanmi Lavalas*.

The Prophet and Power is a key source for understanding the intricate set of factors that contributed to the dynamics of this turbulent period and an important contribution to Haitian and Caribbean studies.

References

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