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Red and Black in Haiti: Radicalism, Conflict, and Political Change, 1934–1957. By Matthew J. Smith (Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 2009) 304 pp. \$59.95 cloth \$24.95 paper

Some books are statements in and of themselves. Smith's book is one of them. Contrary to most politicians and observers who stress the political chaos, the abysmal poverty, and the ecological degradation of Haiti, this book demonstrates that Haiti is a "normal" country with its own political dynamics and its own ideological development. This simple, but often forgotten, message is enough by itself to make the publication of this book worthwhile.

Smith wants to show how political developments in twentieth-century Haiti were the result of a specific interaction between discourses on race and class and their concrete political implementation. Employing painstaking archival and oral-history research, he reveals the vibrancy and often original tone of the political debate by focusing on the crucial period before the brutal Duvalier dynasty took hold of the country. A proper understanding of the disastrous development of Haitian politics, as well as its promises, requires analysis of what happened after U.S. troops left the country in 1934, and the country experienced its “second independence.”

In this period, the political debate in Haiti acquired a new, and in many ways, unique urgency, particularly regarding the relationship between class and race. Race had always been a determining topic in Haiti, which was the first independent nation of South America and the Caribbean and the first one in the hemisphere to abolish slavery. Proudly carrying the banner of “Black Republic,” Haiti found its identity in the racial issue. However, by the 1930s, the colored, mulatto elite had created a firmly entrenched powerbase, distancing itself from the black masses.

During the presidency of Elie Lescot (1941–1946), the racial and social tensions that had remained under the surface came to a boiling point. The charismatic Daniel Fignolé used the support of the growing urban masses of Port-au-Prince to advance a clearly *noirist* agenda that was highly critical of the light-skinned elites, viewing Haitian politics as a struggle between black and mulatto. In 1946, Lescot was removed by a revolution, known as *dechoukaj* (uprooting). The irony was that in the elections that followed this upheaval, almost none of the radical politicians attained office.

The new government of Dumarsais Estimé adopted a double agenda. On the one hand, it supported *noirist* ambitions and clearly opened the public domain for black people and their culture. On the other, it promoted conservative economic policies and maintained corruption and nepotism. The tensions resulting from this ambiguity created new political space for radical political movements and trade unions. Meanwhile, the army, which had become stronger, became increasingly active in the political arena, eventually replacing Estimé with Paul Magloire in 1950. On the surface, not much changed, but military rule laid the foundations of state violence and repression that, in this period of global anti-communism, decimated the left.

Smith follows Trouillot’s interpretation of this era as the consolidation of a political system in which politics and violence were inextricably connected.¹ The ideological debate about race gradually became a pretext for mere political bickering. Reeling from rural and urban poverty, a growing national debt, and widespread corruption, the Haitian state became the scene of political violence and repression. President Mag-

1 Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Haiti: State Against Nation: The Origins and Legacy of Duvalierism* (New York, 1989).

loire lost support after he had antagonized not only the popular classes but also the Haitian elites and, even worse for him, the United States. The country then suffered a confused and chaotic period of anarchy, in which Figiolé miraculously resurfaced. His intense struggle with former ally François Duvalier brought the country to the brink of (if not into) civil war. After the army intervened by brutally killing hundreds of Figiolé supporters, Duvalier's road to power was paved. Abetted by an army-controlled political campaign, Duvalier was "convincingly" elected president in September 1957, inaugurating a new dark phase of Haitian politics.

The detail with which Smith describes these complex events cannot hide some of the book's weaknesses. The interesting relationship between intellectual debate and political reality discussed in the first chapters disappears in the latter part of the book, which turns into standard political history. The book is also guilty of a slight and, to some extent, surprising neglect of social and economic context. Only when recounting the failures of Magloire's military regime does the book explore the profound developmental problems in the country.

Finally, although Smith can hardly be taken to task for not solving the thorny historical issue about the origins of Duvalier's long dictatorship, his conclusions are unsatisfying. How could a country that celebrated its second independence with so much enthusiasm and energy descend into political repression, violence, and anarchy just a few decades later? What was the secret of the Haitian tragedy? Smith may not have answered that question, but he has written an indispensable study for those who may venture to do so in the future.

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