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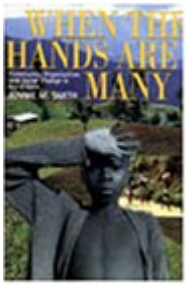

Jennie M. Smith. *When the Hands Are Many: Community Organization and Social Change in Rural Haiti.* Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001. xiv + 229 pp. $22.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8014-8673-9; $62.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8014-3797-7.

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The Lives of Some Haitian Peasants: Implications for Democracy and Development

The Lives of Some Haitian Peasants: Implications for Democracy and Development

This important and controversial book is crucial to understanding more about different sectors of the Haitian peasantry and for the development of new theory. Jennie M. Smith has immersed herself in the Haitian countryside over more than a decade. Her knowledge of Haitian society and culture is deeper and richer than many people who study Haiti. Even if one disagrees with her conclusions, she has offered inductive fodder for new conclusions about Haitian social structures and potential for democracy and development. For reasons that I will indicate below and which probably reflect disciplinary differences (I am a political scientist), I am less impressed by her inductive arguments. I do not believe that democracy cannot be just anything, even if there is ample room for cultural variation. A political scientist might consider institutional failure, the inability to manage cohabitation, even when the same parties are in charge as they are now, the dysfunctional legal system and parliamentary politics, which holds Senator Toussaint above the law, despite the ostensibly autonomous judge's ruling that his immunity should be lifted. One would look at the patterns of corruption in the ruling party as a function, in part, of Haitian, as well as North-Western and globalization phenomena. Since I certainly lack Smith's experiences in the Haitian countryside and because of how much I learned about social practices, changes and reform in rural Haiti, I find this book to be essential reading for anyone interested not only in Haiti, but also democracy and development.

If one wanted to look for reasons why the Haitian peacekeeping missions since 1994 have utterly failed, one could do no better than read Jennie M. Smith's important book. However, her ethnography cum postmodern critique depicting the Haitian peasant's authenticity, in both its identity and traditional dimensions, is juxtaposed to important descriptions of interviews and discussions about democracy and development. I do wonder, as a political scientist, whether an anthropological analysis, rooted in cultural specificity, is overlooking institutional dimensions, much as a psychologist or sociologist would examine that Haitian case in terms of stigmatized identity. However, the book should not be judged by extra-disciplinary criteria, even though there are fascinating inter-disciplinary digressions about postcolonialism, dependency, and imperialism interspersed in the book.

In reading Smith, there are details of the complex relationships in Haitian society, which few understand without living among and within its elements. For once, the role of gender is integrated throughout the text, as the reader understands that male lethargy and domination has had unfortunately resulted from the highest positions, even in popular organizations, left to men. Thus, we learn why the establishment of womenîÃs groups has been a spectacular opportunity to articulate all of the overlooked aspects of development by Haitian parties and formal groups, as well as among official aid lenders. The foreigneîÂs stereotypes of Haitians, also brilliantly presented as ethnography, offer self-condemning criticism of well-meaning, but misguided efforts to help the helpless Haitian. Yet, we are also provided with success stories, usually of micro-efforts, relying on the self-organizing of women and small farmers, or even beggar groups ("gwoupman mandyan").

One learns or re-learns how the "heads together" and community spirit of the "konbit" system of shared labor without wages provides the basis for solidarity and sustenance. If foreign aid lenders cannot collateralize loans from this communal approach, Haitian warlords certainly understand how they must break the backbone of Haitian informal organizing. Otherwise, Haitian laborers might obtain the land that is theirs or they could also end the system of quasi-forced labor invented by the French, "kove." The "atribisyon" system of shared labor during planting seasons suggests Smith's argument that the survival of Haitian society and political development must be built on this social system. There is nothing extraordinary about admitting that Marx's statement, "From each according to his ability, to each according to his needs," makes perfect sense in the Haitian countryside. (It also makes sense among many peasantries and indigenous peoples, which is why I would prefer to see Smith place her observations in the context of peasants everywhere.)

One reads about Haitian popular leaders and movements, many of them veterans of unbelievable struggles against military and paramilitary autocracy, adopting more authentic approaches to democracy and development, but suffering because the "big man" still decides how the projects will proceed and be evaluated. One is treated to long interpretations of ethno-musicology, understanding Haitian lyrics have political meanings and ramifications. Throughout the book, there are apt Kreyol expressions, brilliantly linked to the importance of "respe" or other Haitian values, which are constantly assaulted by the elite and the "blan" who cannot empathize. One learns of the complex patterns and problems of common land ownership. One sees market women maintaining families and the rural economy. One learns (again!) the details of US-AID's misguided pig slaughter that undermined in more ways than I had imagined Haitian society and economy.

There is one aspect of this book that troubles me. I think Smith varies between humble prescriptions for micro-economic and political transformations, which are utterly convincing, and much larger broadsides, which are not untypical of Haitian studies. Smith's controversial choice not to locate her ethnographies in the context of contemporary debates in anthropology may reduce its disciplinary visibility. Of course, there are contradictions presented from her observations, such as her criticism of Michel LaGuerrêÃs observation that condemnations do not divided on military "officer-non-officer" lines. Thus, there is no essentialism attempted here. I do not think Haiti is going to make progress if it continues to remain polarized based on ideologies and ism's, which are out of touch with Haitian reality, and essays which emphasize victimization, apologia, the hated other, oppression, etc. Too much scholarship on Haiti is ideological. Smith's book is not ideological in the ethnographic depictions of self-organizing, songs, ceremonies, and even some areas that she admits are harmful, such as spending too much of savings on the annual celebration at the new year, harking to the Revolution on the "Rachot."

Smith's conclusions about what is an authentic democracy are not clearly explained. Not only at the beginning and end of the book, but within most chapters there follows wholesale condemnations about imperialistic influences, which are perpetuating postcolonial domination. Of course, the postcolonial heritage is absolutely relevant to understanding Haiti's underdevelopment. Yet, it also can be exaggerated, and worse, leaders use this rationale, a la Robert Mugabe, as a justification for autocracy.

Just because Haitian democracy would not be modern or NorthWestern does not mean it will necessarily meet some criteria of democracy, including those of the Haitian peasant him or herself. One need only look at the lack of foreign aid to the Haitian state, though with an enormous amount to quasi-NGOs in humanitarian assistance, since the 1997 and 2000 election failures, to see that the Haitian cannot, as Aristide stated in 1990, survive in 1990 as a democracy. One can assume that this must be primarily the fault of the NorthWest, as Smith implies. Or, one can assert that there is no consensus about what

Haitian democracy looks like, even if the ethnographies implies the need for economic rights and security as a consistent requirement.

This is not to say, as Pogo said, "We have met the enemy, and he is us." Haiti has very real enemies, as do most other postcolonial states. But it also suffers from either a tendency of denial of responsibility, or conversely, assumption of total responsibility. The fault is not only in our stars or in ourselves, but in both. But the solution lies in ourselves, or more correctly, with Haitians. For all the historical references to the Western embargo, occupations, and American plans, there are also many Haitian examples of passivity in the face of oppression, in ability to articulate or mobilize, and now that Aristide has come to power, and his opposition mutually resigned to disloyalty, a refusal of official power to acknowledge unconstitutional and corrupt behavior and a refusal of official opposition to respond equally in Manichean terms. There is nothing Haitian about the latter, nor any excuse for it, and it has been the main cause of dysfunctionality. Aristide chose to make decisions on personalistic criteria. So far, Haitian urbanized peasants have chosen to follow in the path to the parmilitarization of parliamentary politics. The disastrous result is there to see and there is no relief in sight, as I wrote in February 2002. There remains "a little bit of a Macoute in all Haitians" and the continuity of Haitian peasant structures and cultural specificity is not just a path for democratization, as Smith maintains, as it is also a root to deeper authoritarianism. The North-West is not responsible, as far as I can tell, for either all the paramilitary gunmen lurking in unseen background, just as it is not responsible for Aristide to undertake a defensive, but armed response. In my understanding of democracy, war-like politics are incompatible. Someone has to become the peacemaker, or a state has to disarm the percentage of the population that is armed and aiming. The opposition allied itself with those heinous elements. Despite the some elements of the "Sermon on the Mount", Aristide has not chosen to become the peacemaker. This is a formula for authoritarian rule.

I think that Smith's accurate representations of irrelevant and harmful NorthWestern prescriptions also overlook the reality that the ever-worsening crisis requires life-affirming honesty on the part of Haitian intellectuals about their leaders and even their peasants. Anthropologists may lack the political scientist's distance and may have "clientitist." Of course, the Haitain peasant is certainly a victim and no book should overlook that reality. While she eloquently demonstrates that modernization or modernity imposed from the North-West will also prologue the situation, there are not enough recommendations in the entire book about what peasants should do en masse to improve their situation. Is this approach is guilty of "reorientalizing the Orient?" The postmodern valuation of difference makes for wonderful reading. It underscores the authenticity and Haitian peasant traditions and the authenticiy and Haitian peasant identity. Smith's conclusion that democracy cannot be autonomous, reliable and robust unless built on Haitian identity and tradition is certainly true. But I disagree that any version of Haitian democracy can be built on what may be Haitian (self-stigmatized) identity and Haitian (passive) peasant traditions (in spite of the legacy of the Haitian revolution). Maybe my parenthetical suggestions should not be mentioned. But I would like someone like Jennie Smith, not the Harrisons observing from AID headquaters, to reach that conclusion. I am left with only my uninformed speculations about what ails Haiti. Does Haiti really need revolution or is a greater does of self-criticism needed, in addition to the easy foreign targets co-responsible for international and domestic failures of past decades.

Thus, Smith can emphasize the trauma of two centuries of postcolonial rule, when most states that became independent in the nineteenth century lack that identity. No other Latin American country, for all the complaints about dependency and imperialism, would also claim to be ruled by a postcolonial state. My feeling is that Smith certainly debunks North-Western approaches without suggesting much of an alternative. That is not unreasonable, if Haitians can be allowed to assume their own fate. However, her conclusions are also rooted in what I think goes too far in accepting Haitian exceptionalism, something which other anthropologists like Rolf Trouillot or Patrick Bellegarde-Smith do not appear to assert. The Haitian way, to be sure, but also the peasant way too. Haitian uniqueness lends itself to a striking similarity between the cultural difference emphasis of the left, epitomized by SmithÎÃs important book, and the cultural difference emphasis of the right (emphasized by cultural firstists like Huntington, Wiarda, and especially an anathema to Haitianists, Lawrence Harrison.)

Perhaps I have focused too much on Smith's conclusions and not enough on her ethnography. Yet I find her depictions absolutely fascinating, valuable and worthy of almost separate study. My only suggestion is that she should have read Yves Francois Pierre's doctoral dissertation (Columbia University) that analyzes some of the same peasant joint work activities, along with social traditions, identities, and rites. He suggests that the success

of another authentic Haitian, Francois Duvalier, is partly not only of his design, but also the receptivity for such a savior, rooted in authentic Voudon imagery and vocabulary. Aristide too is authentic, but are not some of his recent choices disastrous for the Haitian peasant? The US, under recent administrations, has offered the current government the opportunity to take action. Aristide said no aid was needed, but he has chosen to sign misguided Western programs. Now that he cannot get that aid to build the Haitian state, ironically, he appeals for more. Is not this too authentic? Is Aristide's continuing popularity, even after building a paramilitary force not unlike Papa Doc's, also a reflection of Haitian peasant culture? Or is it merely raw political power, for which culture offers little advice? I do not now the answers to these questions. Smith has called for an important debate that needs to be built on first-hand, anthropological understandings. Not only political scientists ought to learn this lesson, rather than rely inordinately on World Bank statistics and lessons of failure, but permit Haitians to craft what Haitians can create.

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