

Haiti

The history of Haiti is similar to that of other once-colonized nations, which display economic, class, gender, religious, and ethnic inequalities. As Deepa Naraya argues, when Haiti gained independence in 1804, two social groups emerged, one composed of newly freed slaves who fought for personal freedom and another of the small class of freed people who had fought for the economic and political autonomy of the nation. The result of this original cleavage is a society deeply divided and polarized between its urban and rural areas. Haitian society possesses informal connections among power circles and a rich social capital only at local levels.

Networks in urban areas reflect the segregation that is the product of a complex decolonization process. Two groups are clearly separated in them: on the one hand, the inhabitants of large urban slums, and on the other, those who dwell in privileged gated communities.

Haiti's rural zone is organized into solid local groups, whose actors are bound by relations of interdependence; the links to other local groups are based on emotive relations, dispersed family networks, and trade. Small-scale agriculture provides the main subsistence for these local networks. Because of frequent natural disasters, this economic activity is very vulnerable; however, it forms the base for the formation of different interest groups. For example, the small cooperatives of coffee producers that have established fair trade networks within the country reveal the strong ties and common values between rural actors.

As demonstrated by various studies, social capital in Haiti is quite rich locally, where it is employed to protect networks. However, local groups with high levels of social capital also experience extreme poverty. Since the local spheres remain economically weak, interdependence and family bonds are crucial for the survival of groups. Haitian society is often described as a cluster of dispersed family networks, an important observation that permits us to understand the relationship of the country's social life to strong family ties, both at the national and transnational levels. Social space is a product of several local networks, each self-governed, stable, and autonomous and based on reciprocal and interdependent relationships. These networks are independent and often detached from other groups, whether at the local or the national level. In fact, several authors interpret the poverty and violent instability of the state as a result of the clusters of disconnected networks.

The role of networks within power circles in Haiti must be understood in context of different spheres. There are various groups informally interacting with political actors, and it is possible to identify informal religious, economic, and familial connections within the ruling groups of the country. Since economic and familial bonds exist mainly within local networks, religious ties have become the most widespread type of informal links between local, national, and transnational groups.

The religious actors are embedded in local spheres, and they implement pragmatic strategies to improve the living conditions of communities. In order to stabilize their communities in Haiti, transnational religious networks support and influence the local groups and vice versa. The restructuring of religious spaces follows the rural exodus, enhances the bonds between the country and immigrants, and brings religious ties to urban networks, acting as a counterweight to existing inequalities.

As argued by several studies, the role of social networks is central to the Haitian migration process. Haitian transborder citizens have created social relationships and communication networks that connect migrants in the diaspora. These networks have generated a transnational social space that includes multiple, diverse political actors. From the time of the dictatorship of the Duvalier family to that of the current democratic system, these groups have projected a specific voice in proclaiming the rights of citizens. The crisis point in Haitian immigration was reached in the early 1990s, after the first democratic elections and the political repression that followed the military coup against President Jean-Bertrand Aristide. Immigrant networks have become part of the national political process, as they have supported the exiled president. According to many contemporary theorists, the military coup has strengthened the ties between immigrants and those living in Haiti.

Since the catastrophic earthquake that hit the area around the capital of Port-Au-Prince in January 2010, social media workspaces have been crucial in creating support networks on a global scale. Online social networks have played an important role in spreading the word, raising funds, and raising awareness of the need for a massive humanitarian crusade.