



Political Economy in Haiti: The Drama of Survival

Simon M. Fass

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This important study introduces the conceptual premise that families, like firms, analyze their circumstances, make decisions, and pursue courses of action on the basis of what they perceive to be the most efficient methods for producing and reproducing survival. Combining this premise with an extraordinary assemblage of facts gleaned over the period of a decade from the streets, markets and homes of Port-au-Prince, the author weaves a tapestry of despair and hope which only an unusual degree of intimacy with the details of everyday life in the city could provide. The result is a considerable deepening of understanding about the politics and economics by which family members earn their livelihoods, distribute resources within and between households, produce life and labor from food and water, provide shelter and schooling for themselves, and borrow money to finance these and other activities.

These different dimensions of daily existence form a web of interdependency in which change in any one dimension causes change in all the others. As Professor Fass's work demonstrates, research and development assistance practices of public and private organizations, in such areas as employment, health, housing, education and credit are often irrelevant. This is because they are necessarily guided by prevailing concepts and theories with respect to the circumstances of the urban poor, which sometimes do the poor considerable disservice.

With the additional insight provided by a decade of participation in the design of policies, programs and projects serving as a tempering influence, the author does not leap to easy criticism of prevailing views and practices. He notes that ideas and interventions change in response to new understanding, sometimes in ways that the producers of such understanding could never have imagined. The problem is that change is painfully slow, and in desperately poor countries like Haiti, waiting for change exacts an almost intolerable price from the poor.

This book is a provocative yet highly original contribution which will require serious attention from scholars and practitioners of development. Appearing as it does soon after the great seaward exodus of Haitians and urban unrest culminating in the flight of the Duvalier family, this timely volume will provide illumination for those seeking to understand the circumstances that press people to risk all in the name of survival.

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