

The Social and Cultural Impacts
of
the United States Occupation
on the People of Haiti
(1915 – 1934)

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The United States' marine occupation in Haiti from 1915-1934 was intended to bring about changes to better Haitian society, politics, and economics; such is generally implicit in the purpose of an occupation. It was successful in that widespread changes did take place in Haitian society, however, the changes that occurred were not the positive changes envisioned by the invading Americans. In effect, the U.S. occupation completely changed the life of almost every Haitian in the country, and thus its effects are far reaching in every aspect of life. All groups, castes and classes of Haitians were affected in some way by the occupation: the rural peasants, the urban working class and the social elite all felt its influence. Although at first glance, there were advances made in Haiti during this time, the occupation had a vast array of very negative effects on the development of Haitian culture and society. This paper will show that even the apparent benefits derived from the occupation had negative repercussions on Haitian society and contributed to the problems which are still present in Haiti today. The obviously negative impacts of the occupation were a result of racism and discrimination, especially the reinforcement of the elite class as the rulers of Haiti and the reminiscence of slavery. The impacts which may appear to be positive include: achieving unity in resistance – both militaristically and intellectually, improvements in the infrastructure, and stabilization of the military. As mentioned above, each of these apparently positive products of the US occupation eventually brought negative effects to the Republic of Haiti, namely the widening of the dichotomy between the elite and the poor.

Racism

The first and most obvious effect of the US occupation was a result of repression and discrimination practiced by the Americans. This was a tremendously racist period in American History. The Jim Crow laws were in full force in the United States, which in essence allowed for segregation and other propagation of racist ideology. Judging by American conduct in Haiti, it was clear that the Americans brought this ideology with them to Haiti.

The race-oriented attitude of superiority brought by the Americans in 1915 re-introduced an ideology that had been prevalent in Haiti many years earlier. From colonial times to post-independence Haiti, color had been a measure of intellect, worthiness and status in Haiti. However, since independence, this ideology had been slowly replaced. This is evidenced by the fact that since 1843, all of the Presidents and political leaders were black military generals, most of which hailed from the north.¹ In the political realm of the time the brown elites were joined by the presence of the new class of black elites.² In many respects, prior to the US occupation, the notion of social segregation based on race had been essentially replaced by ostracism based on class. Visitors to Haiti in the period preceding the occupation often took note of the striking racial egalitarianism in Haiti.³ This popular attitude was dramatically altered upon arrival of the American troops, who brought with them the American ideology of race and caused the re-emergence of such among the Haitian people themselves.

¹ James Leyburn, *The Haitian People* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1941), 101

² Carolyn Fick (Lecture presented at Concordia University, Montreal, QC, March 15, 2007)

³ Hans Schmidt, *The United States Occupation of Haiti: 1915-1934* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1995), 135-136

The marines viewed their role in Haiti as a successful and developed parent who was to subdue and educate the ignorant and less intelligent Haitian people. Mary Renda, author of Taking Haiti, defines their approach as paternalistic.⁴ Americans thought of themselves as being far superior to the Haitian people in all domains of life, irrespective of skin tone. They took it upon themselves to impose the American lifestyle upon the Haitian people. The attitude was that Haitians were oblivious with regards to establishing a government, economy, and functioning society and were entirely dependent on world powers for aid. Racism was inherent in accomplishing their goals and segregation became increasingly important as well, as intimidation was used as a tool to subdue the inferior Haitians and to impose their omniscient ways.

American racist views were displayed in various ways throughout the occupation. It began simply as “cultural” segregation. The Americans began to form elite clubs and to close the door to Haitians. The only non-Americans permitted to enter such clubs were the servants and workers. Americans restricted their dealings with Haitians to military business only. The mingling of Americans and Haitians on a social or casual basis was considered unacceptable. Many simple acts of racism and discrimination in everyday interaction caused great offense and insult on the part of many Haitians. An example of this is found in Schmidt’s 1971 book, The United States Occupation of Haiti: 1915-1934: At social events, American men freely danced with Haitian women, but white women refused to even speak with Haitian men.⁵ Such seemingly small offenses strained the relationship between Haitians and Americans during the early stages of the occupation.

⁴ Mary A. Renda, *Taking Haiti: Military occupation and the culture of US imperialism, 1915-1940* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 89-91

⁵ Hans Schmidt, *The United States Occupation of Haiti: 1915-1934* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1995), 138-139

Racism and the Elites

Another important facet of racist repression by the Americans was the effect on the Haitian light-skinned elite class. Though their skin tone may have approximated that of the Americans, the occupants looked down upon all Haitians—regardless of displayed phenotype or social class—for having black in their blood. US Marine Colonel Walker is quoted as having declared: “They are real niggers and no mistake – there are some very fine looking, well educated polished men here, but they are real nigs beneath the surface.”⁶ The Americans came to Haiti under the pretense of breaking down social barriers and promoting equality among the people of Haiti. Initially, they saw themselves as contemporary Robin Hoods who were to take from the pockets of the elite and give it back to the masses who were in need.

This was the first time the elite—and especially the light skinned elite—had experienced social and racial discrimination. They were accustomed to being socially superior and looking down upon the rest of society. They were often offended by American behavior, as they expected to be treated with respect and dignity, equal with Frenchmen. The elites did not give the Americans the respect they demanded. They held to their precious francophone culture which had distinguished them from the uneducated masses for so many years. In the eyes of the Haitian elite, it was the Americans who were ignorant and in need of formation. In response to American discrimination, the elite sought to maintain power by further distancing themselves from the less educated lower strata of society. In retaliation to American exclusion, they formed their own elite clubs and societies closed to the masses.

⁶ James Ferguson, *Papa Doc, Baby Doc: Haiti and the Duvaliers* (New York: Basil Blackwell Inc., 1987), 27

Though the initial discrimination was widespread and directed equally towards the blacks and the light-skinned, the masses and the elite, certain aspects eventually changed. The Americans chose to leave a Haitian in charge of the country – one who was respected by the people, but malleable enough to be manipulated for American exploit. Given the choice between light-skinned Sudre Dartiguenave and black extremist Rosalvo Bobo the choice was clear. This important decision by the Americans returned political supremacy to the sphere of the light-skinned elites. As chiefs of the Haitian state, Dartiguenave and his light-skinned successors; Louis Borno and Sténio Vincent, did little, if anything, to help the Haitian people, but acted as puppets in the hands of the American occupiers. This is epitomized by Vincent's behavior in response to the massacre in the Dominican Republic in 1937. Even after the Americans had left, he remained malleable to President Roosevelt's interests in accepting \$750,000 for the 30,000 Haitian lives lost.

With the favoritism of the light-skinned class, the US betrayed their own initial goal of promoting equality among Haitians. Between their repression and subsequent promotion of the Haitian light-skinned elite, the occupants were instrumental in widening the gap between Haiti's elite and poor.

Reminiscence of Slavery

For many of the black rural poor in Haiti, the American regime was uncomfortably close to slavery. The discrimination they felt based on their skin color was excessive. However, it was far worse than just discrimination and hatred. The Americans found an old law enacted in Haiti under King Henri Christophe. This was called the Corvée law and required Haitian peasants to work in forced public labor groups to build

roads and railways.⁷ They were worked extremely hard with very little time for rest. They had no choice in the matter; they were required by law to work. For many of these peasants, conditions were too similar to the “*ancienne regime*” of slavery and subservience. It was this law among other tensions that caused the Haitian people to rise up in resistance against the American regime.

Resistance

Haitian resistance against the US marines was an important aspect of the occupation. The racism and hatred the Haitian people felt as a result of the behavior and attitude of the Americans caused them to unite. This was likely the first time since the revolution that the people of Haiti felt a need for solidarity. Resistance to the regime was expressed both militaristically and intellectually.

The first sign of military resistance against the occupiers was the uprising of the Caco rebels. Led by Charlemagne Peralte, this group of rural insurgents was openly averse to the occupation from the beginning. They existed prior to the occupation but had not united their efforts as they did against the Americans in the 1920s. In the ensuing battle, over 6000 of these rural Haitian peasants were killed. Among their number was Peralte.⁸ He was killed by two US marines who were disguised as Haitians. His body was then hung on a door. It was displayed, photographed and distributed as a sign of American superiority with the purpose of discouraging such rebellions in the future. Ironically, and much to the chagrin of the Americans, because of how Peralte’s body was positioned in the photograph, many Haitians began circulating rumors that he was crucified, which only added to his legacy and made him a messianic figure among the

⁷ James Leyburn, *The Haitian People*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1941), 104-105

⁸ Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Haiti: State Against Nation* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1990), 106-107

oppressed peasants. While the unity achieved by these peasants in the revolt against the occupation may appear to be a step forward, it too had many adverse effects. Caco armies had existed prior to the occupation; however, they hadn't reached the level of solidarity that was achieved as they united against the Americans. Their success and legacy provided the basis for guerilla bands in Haiti, which continue to plague the country to this day. An example is in the 1960s, François Duvalier's militia was provided with armbands adorned with Caco symbols, as the Cacos were the first of their kind.⁹

Intellectual resistance was a very important development that began during the US occupation. The intellectuals of the developing black middle class began publishing ideals in editorials and publications which were subdued by the Americans. A new intellectual movement was spawned by the cultural repression from the Americans. This new movement was called cultural indigénisme. Its main proponent, Jean Price-Mars, was a black middle class descendant of Jean-Mars Belley, a famous black from the times of the revolution. Under the despotic regime of the Americans, many Haitians sought identity to contrast the imposed culture of the marines. The elites chose to identify with French culture, while the masses had no identity to claim. Lead by the innovative thinking of Price-Mars, cultural indigénisme sought to define Haitian identity mainly through the peasantry and by returning to its African roots. This was the first time that the ethnography of rural Haitians had been studied. Along with these studies came increased emphasis on the value of the vodun religion, the creole language and the subsistence lifestyle of Haiti's rural masses.¹⁰

⁹ Hans Schmidt, *The United States Occupation of Haiti: 1915-1934* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1995), 82-83

¹⁰ Sidney W. Mintz, introduction to *The Haitian People*, by James Leyburn (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1941), xii-xiii

This intellectual awakening may seem to be a positive result of the occupation. However, upon closer analysis we discover what eventually happened to the seemingly productive indigéniste movement. As a result of the racist mentality which had been re-introduced by Americans during the occupation, the movement of cultural indigénisme became infused with racial undertones and evolved into another movement known as 'noirisme'. It was this latter movement which eventually gained political power and proved to be far less beneficial to the Haitian people than the indigéniste movement could have been. We see in this a case where the occupation resulted in something that had the potential to be ultimately beneficial, but once again, because of the approach taken during the occupation, it resulted in detriment for Haiti.

Improvements in Infrastructure

Similar to the awakening of the intellectual indigéniste movement, improvements in Haiti's infrastructure under American occupation may seem like a great benefit. The truth is that the improvements in Haiti's infrastructure were but fleeting conveniences that aided in the widening of Haiti's socio-economic gap and was nocuous to Haitian society. In The Haitian People, Leyburn argues that though the occupation was difficult for the people of Haiti to bear, the benefits brought to them as a result of the occupation were indispensable.¹¹ However, this is likely because the perspective available to him in 1941 was vastly different from ours more than 60 years later. He pointed to the benefits of increased infrastructure, roads, railways, hospitals, schools, cars and electricity during this time. Looking back, we can now see that any benefits wrought by these changes were fleeting and selective. Many, if not all of these resources which had been built by

¹¹ James Leyburn, *The Haitian People*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1941), 102-103

Americans have since fallen into disrepair and have been of no use to the people for decades. As the Americans did not train Haitians to build these commodities themselves, when maintenance was needed, it was unavailable. Also of note is that these resources primarily served the urban elite. It was rare that a school or hospital was built in a rural area. Running water and electricity remained unavailable to most of the Haitian peasantry. The increased infrastructure and construction of railways and roads led only to further centralization of power in Haiti and was to the disfavor of the rural masses. Because of the increased accessibility of the rural areas, multinationals and foreign interest increased. This caused peasants to be removed from their land holdings. These companies often selected the most fertile parts of the land. An example of this is the Haitian-American Sugar Company (HASCO), a large multinational company which was established just prior to the occupation.¹² Following occupation there were many more such companies which took interest in rural Haiti because of the increased access to rural Haiti. Even the apparent benefits of the US occupation in Haiti have contributed to its social and economic demise by magnifying the root of the problem in Haiti – the dichotomization of classes.

Military

Another very significant event which increased the already present inequality among Haitians was the dissolution of the Haitian army by the American Marines. This was one of the first ventures undertaken in the occupation. The Americans disarmed and neutralized the highly disorganized army as a measure of protection for their regime and replaced it with the Gendarmerie d'Haïti (later the Garde d'Haïti), which would serve

¹² James Ferguson, *Papa Doc, Baby Doc: Haiti and the Duvaliers* (New York: Basil Blackwell Inc., 1987), 25

their own interests in fighting against the Haitian people. The results of disbanding the army were numerous. The Haitian army was the vessel by which the blacks had come to and remained in political power for the 70 years prior to the invasion. It was through the military that the rural masses of Haitians were able to gain social mobility and a measure of power. By dissolving the army and placing the elites in power, the Americans set Haiti up for many more years of domination by the elite class.

The United States' occupation of Haiti from 1915 to 1934 drastically changed the entire cultural and social landscape of Haiti. The Americans' influence reached into every aspect of Haitian politics, economics, culture and society. This paper has focused on analyzing the effects the occupation had on the culture and society of Haiti during the occupation itself. It is very clear that there are many negative effects that came as a result of the occupation. However, upon analysis, one can see that even the apparent benefits which Haiti gleaned from the occupation were fundamentally damaging to its people. Many of the effects of the occupation served to widen the gap between Haiti's elite and poor. Such a large dichotomy and the interminable lack of a strong middle class in Haiti have been attributed by many scholars as a key factor in Haiti's continuing struggles. It is important to note that this separation of the classes was greatly exaggerated and promoted during the time of the American occupation. In essence, this time period was a crucial one for the development of Haitian society and culture; unfortunately many problems arose and re-emerged in Haiti during the occupation. The United States' influence in Haiti was far reaching and ultimately very detrimental to the development of the world's first black republic.

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