

From Colonialism to Neoliberalism: The Co-production of Poverty and Environmental Degradation in Haiti

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The purpose of this research paper was to make an apparent connection between the current environmental degradation of Haiti and its long history of slavery, poverty, gender inequality, political insecurity, and economic repression. The text begins by explaining colonization and slavery's role in setting up agriculture as the driving force of the nation's economy, then goes to demonstrate how this form of agriculture has proven to have lasting effects on the health of the environment, citizens, particularly female farmers, and Haiti's position in the globalized market. In order to support the arguments presented, research was conducted using a variety of books and articles focusing specifically on Haiti, Haitian women, its environmental and social issues, and the economic state of Caribbean countries. The author proposes an increase in environmental education and government support and the incorporation of modern and sustainable technology to improve Haiti's worsening economic and social conditions.



INTRODUCTION

Natural disasters are indiscriminant, affecting countries worldwide, propagating the spread of fatal diseases and costing individuals their lives, homes, and livelihoods. It should be noted that, however devastating these disasters may be, they are generally considered temporary disruptions from which society eventually regains its state of normalcy. It is during the aftermath of these natural disasters that the footprints of inequality become evident; some countries recover quickly whereas others do not. In recent years, few countries exemplify this situation as does Haiti, a nation that has experienced the gamut of natural disasters from earthquakes and hurricanes to floods and droughts. The frequency in which these disasters occur leads many to wonder "why Haiti?" and "what makes this country the exception and not the rule?" Some might point to Haiti's geographic location while others might speculate that it is the ill will of a divine force. However,

I argue that the core issues behind the occurrence of natural disasters in Haiti stem from social forces rather than natural ones. In this paper, I explore the idea that the human tragedy, state of impoverishment, and environmental degradation experienced in Haiti is rooted in a history of agricultural and related structural and social underdevelopment that dates back to colonialism and slavery.

METHOD

This paper uses historical and literary methods to trace the current set of socio-environmental problems back to Haiti's legacy of colonialism and slavery. I show that the pattern of agricultural development that began under colonial powers has had continuing negative implications on the environment, economy, and Haitian people. In order to explore the probable causes of this country's vulnerability, the paper analyzes and compares various sources of literary data focusing on Haitian history

and women, and the Haitian economy. Although the sources span from colonial to contemporary periods, they demonstrate commonality and provide a cohesive framework in which connections can be made between themes, such as race, class, gender, and the environment. A world systems theory is used to synthesize the data.

The paper is organized as follows: First, I provide background information on Haiti's history as a European colony and later as an independent nation. Secondly, I describe the negative environmental results of the plantation-based agricultural system. Following this, I analyze the emergence of Haiti's economy in a globalized market, and lastly, I describe how this economic state has affected the lives of female peasant farmers in crop production and distribution. I conclude with a discussion of the wider implications of the case that Haiti holds for development.

1. Historical Context

In order to properly understand the current and specific dilemmas of any nation, knowledge of its general history is necessary. Europeans arrived in Hispaniola in 1492, and gradually French colonists established dominion over the western third of the island. Shortly thereafter, enormous numbers of African slaves were transported to replace the indigenous peoples of the Taino tribe, who had been decimated by foreign diseases at the start of the 17th century. The colonizers took advantage of the slaves' traditional ecological knowledge (TEK) (Kimmerer 2002) of agriculture and made them work under dismal conditions to yield successful cash crops, such as coffee and sugar.

Most of these goods were cultivated exclusively for the elite class and exported abroad. Meanwhile, slaves had very little food to harvest for themselves which, in turn, "emphasized mono-crop production for export and neglected food production for local markets" (Datta and Kornberg 132). In addition, plantations established a caste system based on race, gender, and class, the strongest indicators of an individual's social and economic status. The hierarchy started with the small ruling white class, followed by a larger group of mulattoes, and ended with a significant population of black slaves. This hierarchy was further dichotomized by gender, subordinating females to their male counterparts. According to this structure, black women, although they planted, harvested, worked as traders, and

eventually took on "roles as the main producers of food crops throughout the region," were branded as the lowest members of society (Datta and Kornberg 132).

Towards the late 18th century, slaves began revolting against the French and their imposed caste system under the leadership of Toussaint L'Ouverture and eventually claimed their independence in 1804. This made them inhabitants of the first post-colonial black nation in the world. This newfound country was officially named Haiti or *Ayiti*, which translates as the "Land of Mountains" in the Taino language. Although the French continued to carry influence in the government and the Spanish acquired a significant portion of the island (an area that is now known as the Dominican Republic), Haiti surfaced as the "Pearl of the Antilles" (a title it shared with Cuba), due to its successful production of agricultural goods. However, Haiti eventually lost its luster under the wear and tear of the years to come, which were characterized by an intersecting set of conditions: dictatorial rule, social injustice, overuse and gross exploitation of natural resources, and foreign intervention. As the Haitian people began their path on the ever-winding road of struggle and injustice, the land beneath their feet began to crumble and transform into a soil drastically less fertile and vibrant than it had once been. Even after Haitians gained independence from the French, they were, ironically, still dependent on the French, since independence was based on an agreement that Haitians would repay their government a large debt on the grounds of lost property. In this regard, Haiti was perpetually enchained to France under the pretense of freedom.

2. Environmental Issues

Currently, the Haitian environment, both social and natural, has continued this trend and seems to be getting worse. As the poorest nation in the Western Hemisphere, Haiti is marked by high rates of unemployment, infant mortality, illiteracy, ongoing state-sponsored violence and repression, increasing hunger, landlessness, and unemployment (Bell 16). A probable cause of these issues is the class structure: a large population of individuals living in poverty forms the foundation of the Haitian economic demographic pyramid, followed by a thin middle class, and a miniscule elite. The income gap between the impoverished and the middle and elite classes is significant in size and

continues to widen. Statistics show that 56 percent of the population lives in extreme poverty, living on less than \$1 US dollar a day (Sletten 11). Agriculture is the largest sector of Haiti's economy: "approximately 70 percent of the Haitian people live in rural areas and work as peasant farmers" and struggle to survive by planting crops that yield minimal profit due to declining production, such as coffee, corn, bananas, cocoa, and sugarcane (Racine and Ogle 55). Despite its great impact in the economic sector, rural areas are highly underdeveloped without an adequate amount of schools, health services, technological advancement, and government support. In addition, "decline in production can be linked to a rising population, deforestation, erosion, and overuse of land" (Racine and Ogle 55). Although the majority of Haiti's land is unsuitable for farming, many individuals continue to cut down what is left of trees on mountainsides to try to render the land available for agricultural use, since the soil in eligible agricultural areas has been exhausted. Trees are also used to produce wood-charcoal, which is the largest source of Haitian energy production. The deforestation of mountains will not only result in the intensification of mudslides during the rainy and hurricane period, but also an increase in desertification which "is a result of a long-term failure to balance demand for and supply of ecosystem services in dry lands" (Williams 20). What used to be the Pearl of the Antilles, covered with vast amounts of trees and clean waters, is now the dumpster of the Antilles and the Western Hemisphere, where sewage and waste cover streets and smoke and car exhaust pollute the air.

3. Haiti in a Globalized Market

Today, French economic control over Haiti has been replaced by the control of large corporations from the first world. It is obvious that Haiti has "entered the twenty-first century reeling from the effects of structural adjustment and [is] competing in the globalized economy on disadvantageous terms" (Baver and Lynch 11). One such example is the introduction of the Monsanto seed to Haiti. Although the biotechnological and agrochemical corporation claims to have donated 400 tons of hybrid seeds to help revitalize Haiti's farmland, annual financial compensation is implied (La Via Campesina). In order to pay this debt, the Haitian government charges farmers to buy these seeds. Use of and dependence on these patented seeds will no

doubt reduce the amount of Haiti's indigenous seeds and the little influence that the farmers have left in the local markets. Haiti's land is already unsuitable for the planting of monoculture crops since they easily tire the soil and the lack of crop diversity makes them highly susceptible to pest infestation. The introduction of genetically engineered seeds, formed with strong chemical compounds, heightens environmental concerns, especially since they might increase the resistance level of future generations of pests. If Haitian farmers decide to follow suit, saving their native seeds from previous crops will most likely become prohibited as they already have in numerous other countries where Monsanto has established itself. Seen from this angle, it is the "common, public resources of the poor, which are privatized, and the poor who are disowned economically, politically, and culturally" (Shiva 2). Thus, the problem here is development by dispossession under large foreign corporations rather than underdevelopment.

The environmental damage predominately caused by peasant farmers can be directly linked to the government since it fails to educate the public about the importance of natural resources and industry and does not provide sufficient support to those working in the agricultural sector. Another anomaly is that, although a large portion of the economy is devoted to agriculture, the majority of citizens are plagued by food insecurity: "recent statistics show that half of all Haitian households are able to meet less than 75 percent of their dietary needs" (Racine and Ogle 55). This incidence is most likely related to Haiti's position in the global economy: "the prescribed strategy of producing for export while buying food for daily consumption is not a realistic option... because they have no way to break the monopoly that wealthy families and foreign investors have on the export markets" (Racine and Ogle 55). This neoliberal structure keeps Haiti and its lower class in the grasp of first world countries and the Haitian elite. Under these conditions, it is nearly impossible for Haitian farmers to sell their goods in the local markets, which are simultaneously being inundated by cheaper imported goods from developed countries, such as sugar from the United States. Through the globalization of markets, Haitians, as well as other citizens of third world nations, are "given a spot in the market that causes the poor to become even poorer and the strong to become even stronger" (Bell 120). This

power struggle between Haiti's market and those of other countries perpetuates a trend of dependency.

4. The Role of Female Peasants in Agriculture

Female peasants constitute the majority of those working in the agricultural sector and therefore are the most disenfranchised by the trend of globalization. "The production through which women used to be able to maintain their livelihood and culture is being destroyed" and despite women's critical roles in the early successes of agriculture, they receive little recognition and continue to maintain a low status in Haitian society (Bell 120). "While women assert that they are the *poto mitan*, central pillar, of society, they are also quick to point out that they are the most *defavorize*, marginalized, within the *klas defavorize*, marginalized class" (Bell 18). This is due to the fact that in patriarchal societies, women are considered to be subservient to men (Lerner 1986). This way of thinking led to women earning a much lower wage than men: "the practice of underpaying women for their labor rests on a prevalent myth—that women are not the breadwinners" (Bell 19); since it is assumed that most of these women are married, the gap in their income is seen as reasonable since their husbands earn the majority of wages and that women's salaries are supplemental. However, this assumption is inaccurate, because even if a woman is married, her husband's income might not be sufficient enough to meet the financial needs of the family. In fact, "in as many as 60 percent of families, women bear the sole responsibility of child support, stretching their meager financial resources far beyond their limits" (Bell 19).

Knowing that Haitian women are generally responsible for bearing, rearing, and providing for their children, it can be assumed that if the women struggle then their children will also struggle. Research conducted by United Nations Development Program in the Western Hemisphere concludes that Haitian women "tie for worst, or rank second worst, in the following: economic equality with men, political and legal equality, social equality, life expectancy, mortality in childbearing years, fertility, university enrollment, female adult literacy, percentage of paid employees, and percentage of professionals" (Bell 18). This perpetual cycle of poverty and lack of education and support can only be seen as the inequalities of a disastrous future for the country; "a quick glance in villages

throughout Haiti confirms that women, along with their children, suffer most under the weight of the injustices" (Bell 18). The difficulty of living under such harsh conditions has caused many of these women to abandon their jobs and search for work elsewhere, either in the capital of Port-au-Prince, in the neighboring Dominican Republic, or in the United States, where, oftentimes, they face even more difficulties than they had while living in the countryside. Several of those who choose to leave, immigrate illegally and are subjected to violence and human trafficking.

CONCLUSION

The colonial and slave-state structure once responsible for Haiti's preliminary success in agriculture has become its source of current environmental degradation, economic dependency, and social injustice. While the bridges connecting imperialism to globalization, poverty to environmental overexploitation, and inequality to social status continue to be fortified by race, class, and gender, the bridges uniting the Haitian people, government, and environment, built upon a foundation of collaboration, support, and education, have been neglected. Interestingly, the findings presented in this paper lead back to the same questions used to analyze them: "why Haiti?" and "what makes it the exception and not the rule?" Although Haiti has undoubtedly suffered a long history of the aforementioned issues, it is not the only country to have done so. Countries with colonial and slave legacies, although also ridden with serious social, environmental, economic, and political problems, have nevertheless fared better than Haiti when faced with the threats of both natural and social disasters. If there is an exception then there must be a rule, and it is within this rule that the improvement of Haiti's condition lies.

Individuals in Haiti, rich and poor, male and female, and of all races, should actively participate in the formation of this rule by supporting the efforts to blend traditional farming techniques with modern sustainable agriculture, provide basic education and health services for its population, pay workers a livable wage and train them beyond the service sector, produce a healthy and professional middle class, ensure a democratic political system, and allow the state to make life-affirming decisions for its citizens without the threat of foreign control or foreign disinvestment (Polyné xxiv). Further investigation

should be done to show how Haiti's development model can implement specific and progressive strategies taken by countries with similar colonial histories, but promising futures, to improve their environmental, social, and economic standings.

Nevertheless, the obstacles that Haiti faces are great and many, coming from both internal and external agencies and a long-standing culture of corruption and dependence. Politicians, intellectuals, and activists have debated and analyzed many of Haiti's major issues, and are unable to unanimously identify one causal and effectual relationship and propose one clear and applicable solution. However, the consensus appears to be that the construction of a new and fully independent Haiti is unrealistic, and that the only way for Haiti to transition from a state of emergency to one of recovery and growth, would be for it to take into account all of the factors that brought it to where it is now and use that knowledge during the process of reconstruction to build a grounded and efficient framework (Polyné 244). This framework would need to be authored by strong, disciplined, and consensual leaders who are knowledgeable about Haiti's history and seek the opportunities that are open to this country and push forward with them (Polyné 250). In addition to implementing and changing structural policies, Haiti will also need to discerningly accept aid from members of the international community that are supportive of its goals of an interdependent and sustainable future. It is impossible to completely prevent the likelihood that a natural disaster will occur in Haiti, or any country for that matter, however it is possible to reduce the negative social forces that exacerbate them and oftentimes result in social disasters that are far worse in magnitude.

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