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Radicalism and Haitian Political History

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Matthew J. Smith, *Red & Black in Haiti: Radicalism, Conflict, and Political Change, 1934-1957*. (Chapel Hill, North Carolina, University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 278 pp.

Historians of Haiti have tended to focus on the Haitian Revolution, the U.S. occupation and the Duvalier regime, leaving room for Matthew Smith to pioneer a study of turbulent politics and conflict in post-occupation Haiti. The complexity of the political changes in post-occupation Haiti from 1934-1957 led Smith to interrogate new sources in order to provide a more complete history of this period, building upon works such as David Nicholls' *From Dessalines to Duvalier: Race, Colour, and National Independence in Haiti* and Michel-Rolph Trouillot's *Haiti, State Against Nation: The Origins and Legacy of Duvalierism*. Smith's book provides a broader perspective on Haitian politics by arguing that these radical movements were more complex than color differences that David Nicholls noted. Smith's methodology successfully employs the use of archival research, audio-visual sources, and interviews with participants in radical political movements of this era, demonstrating the thorough research the author has conducted to complete this book. The colors red and black in Smith's title refer to the Marxist and *noiriste* movements respectively and Smith's book examines how they transformed Haiti's political culture. Although these radical movements had a great impact on Haitian politics, they failed to move beyond their own internal rivalries to establish a strong independent future for post-occupied Haiti.

Red and Black in Haiti is organized chronologically and the first chapter begins with the presidency of Sténio Vincent. This allows the reader to appreciate the shift in the emergence and decline of radical movements through the presidencies of Sténio Vincent, Élie Lescot, Dumarsais Estimé, and Paul Magloire. In the 1930s, Marxism was gaining appeal among young intellectuals such as Jacques Roumain and Max Hudicourt, who focused on Haiti's class problems. *Noirisme*, a black nationalist movement, focused on racial differences and praised Haiti's African heritage in *Les Griots*, the journal headed by François Duvalier, Lorimer Denis, and other *noiristes*. According to Smith, David Nicholls' work emphasizes "that color divisions supersede virtually all other issues, particularly class interests," whereas Smith highlights the limitations of this argument by noting that it "offers little explanation of the agency of non-elite actors in shaping the terms of political debate" (5). Daniel Fignolé, a *noiriste*, is one of the non-elite actors who shaped the political debate with his influence over

the unions and urban masses in Port-au-Prince to whom Smith gives particular attention in the book.

Marxism and *noirisme* both challenged the country's political traditions under Vincent, although it was Marxism that became a target of the government. Vincent arrested or exiled those who were suspected of supporting the movement, because he saw it as a threat to his regime. Some *noiristes*, however, were part of the Vincent regime since they believed that Marxism was "far from being the best solution for the masses" (27). In 1930s Latin America, communists "were perceived as anarchists, the antithesis of what nationalism stood for" (17). The suppression of Marxism became the government's mechanism to eliminate opposition groups. The 1937 massacre of Haitians in the Dominican Republic radicalized Haitian students and the Haitian Garde despite constant government repression. It was Vincent's slow reaction to the massacre due to "a combination of fear, political conceit, and a desire to maintain a major source of personal capital," that placed his regime in jeopardy and served as a catalyst for popular protest against him (32).

Chapter 2 focuses on Élie Lescot, who was chosen by Vincent as his successor when Vincent was unable to extend his dictatorship another term. With support from the U.S. and the Haitian press, Lescot won the presidency with a "unanimous victory" (42). Lescot is known for color prejudice in his administration, which is evident in the placement of mostly light-skinned or white elites in government positions and their "unchecked abuses of power" (42). Smith's account differs, since most accounts of the Lescot regime's color divisions have been emphasized, however these divisions were part of other factors that cast an unfavorable light on the administration. Smith's analysis of economic and social conditions in Haiti under Lescot demonstrates that WWII worsened class and economic tensions. Lescot attempted to consolidate his own power through strengthening ties with the U.S., controlling the Haitian Garde, and through nepotism. However failed projects, such as SHADA (Société Haïtiano-Américaine de Développement Agricole), aimed at boosting agricultural development, and the anti-superstition campaign launched by the Catholic Church in 1942, compounded Lescot's difficulties. Radicals continued to be targeted by the government and Marxist newspapers were shut down for "raising questions that sought to divide the citizens against each other," for "sowing hate and fomenting trouble," and for their attempt to "make Haiti a ground of disorders" (55). Max Hudicourt's exile and Jacques Roumain's death dealt a further blow to the Marxist movement in Haiti. While Marxism's influence abated in Haiti, *noirisme's* influence expanded through its connection with *négritude*, a black consciousness movement in the 1940s. Smith then focuses on the rising career of Daniel Figiolé and his bold criticisms of the Lescot regime. Figiolé and other *noiristes*, such as Duvalier, made it of particular importance to distinguish

themselves from Marxists by stating that “materialism had no relevance for Haitians” (27). Figiolé’s popularity among the urban masses in Port-au-Prince, along with the participation of radical groups and students became a force to reckon with during the 1946 Revolution.

Chapter 3 analyzes the 1946 Revolution, which displayed radicalism at its peak. Students started the movement to end the Lescot regime by using literary outlets to vent their frustrations. They planned protests, which spread throughout other departments in Haiti despite attempted suppression through state-sponsored violence. Lescot tried to coerce the Haitian Garde to break up the mobs, however Colonel Franck Lavaud, head of the Garde, organized a junta with Paul Magloire and Antoine Levelt. Lescot went into exile and increasing political freedom was the immediate consequence of his ousting. Smith emphasizes the role of Marxism and labor, namely the MOP (Mouvement Ouvrier Paysan), in shaping the democratic struggle against Lescot.

Despite the formation of communist, socialist, and *noiriste* political groups, it was Figiolé who continued to have the strongest following among urban workers in Port-au-Prince through the MOP and other labor organizations. However he was younger than the constitution’s age requirement to run for Haiti’s presidency. The junta organized presidential elections in 1946, which were divided between Marxists and *noiristes*. Smith reveals the factors that led Dumarsais Estimé to win the election and become the first black president in Haiti in the post-occupation period. Smith challenges received views on Estimé’s election, which was said to be a result of the effort of *noiriste* politicians’ influence, by using *Les Griots* journals from the late 1930s to demonstrate Estimé’s lack of involvement within the *noiriste* movement. Smith provides evidence that François Duvalier only supported Estimé after severing his own ties to Figiolé and the MOP. Further proof that *noiriste* ideologues initially did not support Estimé included the fact that he married into the light-skinned elite and benefitted from *milat* supporters while serving under government posts during the Vincent and Lescot presidencies.

Chapter 4 explores Estimé’s regime, which was more democratic and known for its attempt to provide fair treatment to both blacks and *milats*. Estimé immediately faced pressures from the black middle class, the *milat* elite, and the U.S., who thought his regime was filled with many radicals. The journal *Les Griots*, which was defunct for nearly a decade, came back as a daily newspaper in 1948 and the *noiristes* embraced Estimé as the ““authentic son of the peasant masses’” (105). Smith’s analysis in this chapter examines, in part, how politics influenced musical and artistic production under Estimé. In fact, Smith’s interview with Issa El Saïeh, Haitian musician of Palestinian descent and bandleader of Jazz Saïeh, along with audiovisual sources featuring Jazz des Jeunes, who were praised by *noiristes*, proved helpful to show class-color

antagonisms even within music. Estimé's government encouraged the racial consciousness that accompanied *noirisme* through "the formation of native song, dance and drum troupes"(107). Although Estimé sought to provide fair treatment to blacks and *milats*, the defining characteristic of his regime was the lack of *milat* membership in the cabinet. Estimé's presidency was known for the rise of the "authentiques" or blacks in prominent government positions. The regime's *noiriste* policies were reflected through Estimé's strengthening of Haitian control of the national bank by appointing only Haitians as directors, the nationalization of the banana industry that was previously owned by the Standard Fruit Company, and the appeal to the nation's citizens to raise an internal loan to pay the nation's debt.

Smith pays particular attention to the contradictory nature of black power after 1946. The unchecked corruption by light-skinned elites that occurred under Lescot, continued under Estimé's regime and was instead perpetrated by the black middle class. Gradually, Estimé's popularity faded among the *milats* and black middle class. Smith exposes a scandal at the Miss Haiti Pageant, the Remy-Viau affair, and the creation of an income tax as factors that led to the deterioration of Estimé's relationship with the *milat* elite. The gross mismanagement of state funds and the economic damage caused by Bicentennial Exposition in 1949 made some *noiristes*, such as Figiolé, who had resigned from his government post, become disillusioned with Estimé as well. The final blow to Estimé's support base came when Paul Magloire, a former ally, participated in Estimé's removal on May 10, 1950.

The struggles between the *milat*, black middle class, and internal conflicts within radical political movements aided Estimé's fall and exile. Even with the military in charge, universal male suffrage was introduced and elections were held. Magloire, who Smith notes did not initially present himself as a candidate, began his campaign by touring the island and declared "himself a 'citizen-soldier' willing to correct the inherent mistakes of *Estimisme* and bridge the social divide" (151). Smith analyses how Magloire managed to endear himself to the U.S., the Catholic Church, the bourgeoisie, and even Figiolé. Magloire won the election and his regime has sometimes been called the "golden era" in Haiti, however Smith criticizes this assessment of seeming financial stability by examining the economic picture (163). Although Magloire endeared himself to various political groups before the election, radical groups were violently suppressed during his dictatorship. State-sanctioned violence became more common under Magloire especially towards leftist and oppositional groups, which foreshadows political events in the post-1957 period. The election of Magloire indicated the slow demise of most forms of radicalism. Smith puts the election of Magloire into regional context by noting that the U.S. often supported dictatorial regimes in order to fight against the spread of communism. Newspapers were targeted,

political parties were shut down, and many radicals were imprisoned or exiled. Figiolé, an initial supporter of Magloire, was one of the many radicals who suffered under government persecution.

Chapter 5 covers the economic difficulties and government corruption under Magloire's regime. Magloire sought to modernize Haiti through tourism, industry, and agriculture however it was the worsening economic situation that "found all social and economic sectors opposed to the government" and eventually led to Magloire's own exile in 1956 (168). Lacking popular support and aid, Magloire decided to step down. Magloire's departure led to the beginning of a political crisis from 1956-1957. Violence against political opponents was used as a strategy for victory during the presidential elections in 1957. The military forced provisional presidents, including Figiolé, to resign due to their failure "to neutralize partisan politics" (176). The radicalism that led to the revolution of 1946 and provided the most promise for post-occupied Haiti was defeated by the election of 1957. Political radicalism degenerated into internal strife and political violence by the time of Duvalier's dictatorship. Although radicalism declined in Haiti, Smith argues that 1934-1957 was a significant period for shaping politics in Haiti, because it "produced a rare opportunity for lasting political change," especially after the 1946 Revolution (2).

Smith's research contributes to the study of twentieth century Haiti by providing various avenues of possible research that can be conducted in this period, such as music, women's political involvement, and state control of national culture. Recent studies such as Kate Ramsey's *The Spirits and the Law: Vodou and Power in Haiti*, Millery Polyné's *From Douglass to Duvalier: U.S. African Americans, Haiti, and Pan Americanism, 1870-1964*, and Chantalle Verna's forthcoming *Haiti and the Uses of America* are examples of the growing scholarly literature focused on this period. Overall, *Red and Black in Haiti* is a notable contribution to Caribbean studies and also furthers the work of David Nicholls, Michel-Rolph Trouillot, and others by providing a richer understanding of this understudied period in Haitian history.