

# **The Impact of the American Influence on the Economic and Political Development of the Caribbean: Case Study of Puerto Rico and Cuba**

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Second Year Paper

Citation Style: Chicago Manual of Style

*“When those states which have been acquired are accustomed to live at liberty under their own laws, there are three ways of holding them. The first is to despoil them; the second is to go and live there in person; the third is to allow them to live under their own laws, taking tribute of them and creating within the country a government composed of a few who will keep it friendly to you. Because the government, being created by the prince, knows that it cannot exist without his friendship and protection, a city used to liberty can be more easily held by means of its citizens than any other way, if you wish to preserve it”*

Niccolo Machiavelli, *The Prince*

The end of slavery for the Spanish colonies of Cuba and Puerto Rico was the creation of their own distinct political and social states. With Spain out of the picture, another foreign influence occupied the Caribbean from the late nineteenth-century. It would have been difficult to determine at the time that the United States would become a dominant factor in the political and economic livelihood of the newly dependent states of the Caribbean. This essay aims to discuss the political and economic changes in Puerto Rico and Cuba as a direct and indirect impact of the United States’ expansionist and interventionist policies. Throughout the twentieth-century up to the end of the Cold War, United States’ foreign policies resulted in the economic dependency and political instability of Puerto Rico and Cuba. In order to understand the strategic interests of the United States in Cuba and Puerto Rico, it is imperative to study the formulation of the United States’ foreign policy as slavery ended in the Caribbean.

In the late nineteenth-century when slavery slowly abolished in the majority of the Caribbean colonies, the United States’ position in the Caribbean’s political and economical position became significant. At the same time, Spain’s colonial strength was beginning to fade with its economic power weakening in the Caribbean region. Earlier in the nineteenth-century, the United States had already made a resolution to take over the Spanish territories, remove the European control from the New World and open the U.S. trade market in the Caribbean colonies. Yet the US was not considered to be an empire by any other significant powers. However, the United States had other goals. Pursuing its vision of the “Manifest Destiny” and “reinforced” by Social Darwinist beliefs, the U.S. considered its obligation to free Cuba and the other Caribbean states from the dominant power of Spain.<sup>1</sup> The “Monroe Doctrine” in 1823 explicitly stated that

no Western power would be allowed to control the “Americas” as long as the United States was in the picture.<sup>ii</sup> With slavery abolished in Puerto Rico in 1873 and Cuba in 1886, the latecomers of sugar production were the perfect targets for becoming the subjects of the United States’ political and economical exploitation in the twentieth century.

Sources now confirm that United States’ interest to control Cuba and Puerto Rico was purely for commercial and military reasons. For example, the United States’ capitalist system allowed certain industries to monopolize over its market as they were desperately looking for foreign markets, low-priced foreign goods and cheap labour. Both Cuba and Puerto Rico provided the economic goals that the United States was looking for in addition to these regions’ strategic military grounds. The Treaty of Paris in 1898 ended the Spanish-American War and empowered United States with its goals by officially handing over Puerto Rico to the position of the United States.<sup>iii</sup> In Puerto Rico, the entry of the U.S. received two different reactions; one was the side of the Puerto Ricans, who were proud of their Spanish language, laws, cultures and traditions. On the other side were those Puerto Ricans who had the hope that the U.S. would bring development to their country. All hopes of independence shattered by the U.S.’ military invasion of Puerto Rico.<sup>iv</sup> Cayetano Coll y Toste, a Puerto Rican historian wrote in 1908, “Our autonomous constitution is abolished and the Puerto Rican people changed – in fact, but without right-into a political orphan that is at the mercy of the American progress.”<sup>v</sup> True to the point, Puerto Rico’s political stability and economic conditions drastically changed from the time the United States took control of the territory.

Puerto Rico was strategically significant. For example, if the United States wanted to have control over the Latin America and the Caribbean, it needed a strategic base, which in this case was Puerto Rico. Furthermore, its geographic location allowed the U.S. access to building a canal that connected the Atlantic and the Pacific Oceans. United States was interested in the geographical position of Puerto Rico, but not in its development.<sup>vi</sup> United States from the beginning laid claim of not colonizing the island, but stated that Puerto Rico was an “unincorporated territory” of the United States and their occupation was according to the terms of the treaty. To justify their claim, the United States issued the Foraker Act in 1900 and ended their military occupation in Puerto Rico. However, the act did not bring development to the region. The act brought new civil structures, but all decisions concerning the state remained at the hands of the U.S.<sup>vii</sup> According to Martinez, the policies “repressed” the region from making

any independence movement.<sup>viii</sup> For example, the U.S. appointed all government officials and Supreme Court justices, kept control of the local affairs and had a role in the constitution of Puerto Rico until 1952.<sup>ix</sup> The U.S. also claimed that they brought free election to the region; however, their direct and indirect interference showed otherwise. For instance, the three parties taking part in the election required support from Washington; therefore, they would follow whatever command issued from the U.S. capital.<sup>x</sup> Ultimately, the fight of those who supported the large landowners of the American economy and their political goals would win over the parties who worked to improve labour conditions in Puerto Rico.

Furthermore, in 1914, another attempt was made by the Union Party in Puerto Rico to gain independence, but the U.S. refused to consider the proposal because it did not serve the political model levied by the States. As the U.S. became involved in WWI and was determined to secure its position in the Caribbean, the U.S. occupied Haiti and the Dominican Republic in 1915-1916. To strengthen its position, in 1917 the United States issued the Jones Act to give Puerto Ricans U.S. citizenship, but they became what is called “second class citizens.” For instance, all the jurisdictions and laws of the U.S. applied to the Puerto Ricans, but they had no meaningful participation in the political system of the U.S. The only right was a “nonvoting” representation in the House.<sup>xi</sup> Another advantage to the U.S. was that now Puerto Ricans were eligible to fight in WWI, but they still had no protection under the constitution of the U.S.<sup>xii</sup> After the war ended, various political parties in Puerto Rico demanded a change in the political status of Puerto Rico. One important figure was Albizu Campos from the Nationalist Party who demanded independence of Puerto Rico in the 1920s and 1930s. Consequently, he and his followers spend many years imprisoned in the United States for the so-called “crimes” they committed.<sup>xiii</sup> Malavet indicates that this action of the U.S. was an attempt to suppress the national consciousness of the Puerto Ricans.<sup>xiv</sup>

Furthermore, the only attempt made to improve political status of Puerto Rico was the creation of the Commonwealth in July 1950. The policy supported by the Popular Democratic Party was supposed to give Puerto Ricans the right to set up their own constitution if people supported the decision. The Commonwealth was approved by people in the vote of 375 000 to 83 000, but sources show that one-half of the voters did not participate. The vote passed, but Puerto Rican did not gain their economic and political freedom. For example, the government could initialize laws of the constitution, but the U.S.’ congress had to approve the laws.<sup>xv</sup> The attempt

was to keep Puerto Rico from achieving independence, without directly stating the fact. The United States propaganda promoted that independent statehood meant withdrawal of economic autonomy by the U.S.<sup>xvi</sup> They claimed that Puerto Ricans were incapable of governing a sovereign state, and that they required the United States' support economically and politically.<sup>xvii</sup> Puerto Rico in fact became a "forgotten colony" of the United States.<sup>xviii</sup> The U.S.' persistent attempts to keep Puerto Rico dependent and refusal to give them full autonomy was driven by their economic interest in the regions, which will be discussed in another section of this essay. We will now review the political implication of the United States' influence in Cuba, which is very different from Puerto Rico, although they were both Spanish colonies.

In Cuba, the political standing of the United States was different. Slavery ended in Cuba in 1886. United States was already involved and interested in Cuba because of its sugar production. With "Manifest Destiny" goals in mind, they closely watched the political relations and tensions in Cuba with the Spanish. With several negotiations, Spain refused to sell Cuba to the United States. In 1895 - 1898, the U.S. was no longer interested in keeping its "status quo" with Spain after the Cuban-Spanish War of Independence. America to most Cubans was seen as a "God sent" gift to gain independence from the hegemony of the Spanish. Yet, a few years later, they became imprisoned within the hegemonic and interventionist policies of the United States despite being an independent state.<sup>xix</sup> The United States officially had a military position in Cuba after ending the Spanish colonization by the Paris Treaty in 1898.<sup>xx</sup> The situation of Cuba differed from Puerto Rico in the sense that Cuba was not an "unincorporated territory" of the United States, but they were still unsure of what structure they needed politically to stabilize. Contrary to Puerto Rico, America's heavy interest in Cuba's growing sugar production resulted in improvement of its infrastructure, such as roads, schools, transportation and communication.<sup>xxi</sup> These developments came with a price. For example, the Platt Amendment 1901, which became a part of the Cuban constitution, stated U.S.' military withdrawal from the region in exchange for the U.S. receiving certain military and economic rights, such, creating their naval base in Guantanamo Bay. According to the United States, this occupation was a "reciprocal" guarantee of access, because the Cubans would still gain trade and economic support.<sup>xxii</sup>

In addition, in 1904, the United States' goal to build Panama Canal resulted in another military occupation. This occupation was successful because Cuba was still straggling to stabilize its political system and showed little resistance to U.S.' entrance. Small political

oppositions were put to rest and the political elites used this intervention to gain official positions within the government. This occupation lasted until 1909 when the United States was fully engaged in other political interventions with Panama, Haiti and the Dominican Republic. This particular occupation allowed the Liberal Party to take office, demonstrating the United States' role in making decision in the political state of the Cuban government.<sup>xxiii</sup> The United States made no effort to resolve the constant corruption of the political elites. Until Batista's regime, several political leaders were changed in the government. The U.S.' implementation of Roosevelt Corollary to economically develop and stabilize states in the Caribbean resulted in Cuba's further attachment to the U.S. as Cuba's investor of sugar production and infrastructure.<sup>xxiv</sup> Once Cuba became economically dependent on the United States' investment, it was difficult to gain its economic freedom.

Moreover, Roosevelt in 1933 issued the Good Neighbour Policy, which stated that the U.S. would respect its neighbouring states and their rights without intervention.<sup>xxv</sup> However, this policy was not implemented to the effects of its goals.<sup>xxvi</sup> Some scholars believe that the neutralization of the United States to the political situation of Cuba during the rise of Castro's influence was essential to his success. For example, if United States would have prevented Castro's entrance to Havana it was likely that his chances of seizing the government from Batista would have been minimal. Secondly, the U.S. failed to provide military support to Batista as war continued between the guerrillas and the government. Lastly, Castro at this point had an ambiguous image and United States failed to see his true policies. For example, if Castro had announced that he was a Marxist-Leninist in 1956 rather than in 1961, the U.S. would have made sure to prevent his occupation.<sup>xxvii</sup> As the U.S. and the Soviet Union involved heavily in the Cold War, their eyes turned to other regions, such as Afghanistan, and Cuba remained in their peripheral vision.<sup>xxviii</sup> By the mid 1980s, Cuba become one of the most disciplined, best fed, best housed and educated population in Latin America, but at the same time its foreign debt grew.<sup>xxix</sup> Castro's socialist views and United States' political policies including the Embargo of 1960s had great economic consequences to the political, social and economical stability of Cuba, which will be discussed in another part of this essay.

United State's influence in the Puerto Rican and Cuban economies was the backbone for its political interventionist policies. The United States was interested in Cuba's rich production, while in Puerto Rico the U.S. wanted sugar, and Puerto Rico as an important financial market for

the U.S. goods. For example, the Foraker Act's economic impact was Puerto Rico's full dependence on the U.S.' economic support. By the 1920s, the U.S. controlled about 80% of the lands where sugar grew and 60% of the sugar exports.<sup>xxx</sup> More significantly, the region became a mass producer of goods that Puerto Rico itself could not consume. For example, all the goods manufactured for cheap prices and cheap labour were exported to the U.S. and Puerto Rico remained a subject under United States' tariffs, because they could not enter into an economic trade with any another country. Furthermore, Puerto Rico changed from an agrarian society into a capitalist market of massive sugar plantations.<sup>xxxi</sup> These sugar plantations became significant in the livelihood of the working class and the farmers.

In addition, when the U.S. bought small lands by force from the farmers to consolidate into large plantations, the farmers now had no means of income and became dependent on sugar, coffee and tobacco plantations for employment. Exploitation of cheap labour, especially incorporation of women in the sugar plants and needlework industry was another result of U.S.' capitalist goals. As labour organizations started to rise, little was done to allow any significant changes to labour conditions. Puerto Rico at this time became fully depended on the U.S. as 98% of its exports went to the U.S. and 92% of its imports came from the United States. Meanwhile, Puerto Rico was still not allowed to open its markets to other regions.<sup>xxxii</sup> Unfortunately, by 1930s even the sugar production went down as the U.S. itself faced the Great Depression. The economy in Puerto Rico took a massive bust. For example, the island faced two major hurricanes that killed many and devastated the local economy. Because of U.S.' imposed quotas on sugar production due to the Great Depression the export and production of sugar went down in Puerto Rico.<sup>xxxiii</sup> People were frustrated and demanded some changes to their political and economic systems, but the U.S. at this point was occupied with its own economic conditions to make any response to the requests of the Puerto Ricans. In Puerto Rico, unemployment rates rose, goods became scarce, while wages decreased.<sup>xxxiv</sup> Finally, in order to improve its own economic conditions, the U.S opened the Puerto Rican market in 1947 (referred to as the Operation Bootstrap), but only to mainland capitalists. From that point on, Puerto Rico became a market for cheap labour, cheap production and great profitability. For instance, while unemployment rates improved and many new jobs were created, the program itself was designed for the corporations to make high profits. The corporations paid low wages, low license fees, low property taxes, low

municipal taxes and other corporate advantages that did not improve the overall economic condition of the masses.<sup>xxxv</sup>

Furthermore, the impact of the U.S.' economic policies after 1947 have been vital on the living conditions of the working class. Once the big corporations started to implement new technologies, the big capitalists monopolized the economy, while unemployment rate once again went up for the unskilled workers. Many travelled to the United States for better economic conditions, which on the contrary did not improve their economic status. By 1959, there were over 430,000 immigrants that resided in the United States, with a middle class family income that equalled half of what an American middle class family made in the U.S. This "forced" immigration provided cheap labour and exploitation of the "functional underclass" workers in the United States. In 1974, the United States extended the food stamp program to the Puerto Ricans, which the working class with low wages have become more dependent on.<sup>xxxvi</sup> Although urbanization and industrialization have improved conditions to some extent, the root of the problem to decrease dependency of the Puerto Ricans on the U.S. has not changed. Any economic change in the United States directly affects Puerto Rico.

The Cuban economy on the other hand became a victim of imperialistic policies of the United States. Having received its independence and struggling to set up the structural Republican government, they became reliant on the U.S.' investment in their massive sugar production market. Although Cuba did not have a quota on production or restriction on their markets, still the U.S. became its largest sugar importer. The economic growth of 1902 – 1920s veiled the weak political system of Cuba, thus enabling the political elites and large landowners to gain administrative positions in the government. This proved devastating to Cuba, because the Republican government until 1959 was never able to untie itself from the economic dependency on the U.S.<sup>xxxvii</sup> For example, the administration of Machado was too weak to deal with any economic and social changes, but the economy was still booming. The circulation of money prior to economic depression created jobs. With the new education opportunities, new socialist mentality grew among the youths who demanded reforms. Although during WWI the price of sugar was increasing, but by the Great Depression sugar production dropped.<sup>xxxviii</sup> Conditions changed when Cuba's great sugar partner, the U.S. faced depression.

Furthermore, as Cuba's primary market, the U.S. economy decreased sugar production in Cuba. For example, by 1939, the price per pound of sugar in New York Exchange dropped from

11.34c to 1.97c. At the same time, Cuba was facing competition from the other U.S. territories, such as Hawaii, Puerto Rico and Louisiana.<sup>xxxix</sup> Cuba at this time was also going through political leadership change and chaos due to Machado's oppressive government. Income distribution became sporadic. There was a gap between the income of the rich and the poor.<sup>xi</sup> The new socialist ideologies were developing in Cuba among the middle class, such as that of Castro and Che Ernesto Guevara who would bring new order to the socio-political chaos of Cuba. The 1940s and 1950s saw some increase in the sugar market and when Castro succeeded, he brought gradual but significant changes to the economic conditions. With the Cold War in process, the Soviet Union poured its economic support to the Communist regime of Castro. For example, in the 1980s Soviet Union supplied Cuba with more than \$16 billion in economic aid.<sup>xli</sup> As indicated before, by Soviet's involvement in other third world regions, both the United States and the Soviets lost interest in Cuba. Consequently by the late 1980s, Cuba's foreign debt increased, specifically after the U.S.' commercial, financial and economical Embargo of 1960 in an aim to overthrow the communist regime of Castro.<sup>xlii</sup> The United States diverted its attention away from Cuba and poured its strength into winning the Cold War and overthrowing Cuba's communist regime. Cuba lost its economic support in this war.

History itself is a multitude of decisions that make or break societies. The political and economic situations of Cuba and Puerto Rico today are a direct result of the United States' interventionist and capitalist policies. United States remained in Cuba until its economic interest was answered, but as United States became focused on the Cold War, the concept of "Good Neighbour" policy lost its focus. Today the economic Embargo still stands and has been extended towards Cuba in the claim that it is for the best interest of the American nation, leaving Cuba in a difficult economic position. Puerto Rico on the other hand is still struggling to gain independence. Attempts in gaining their political and economic freedom have brought change, but not independence. United States has had many policy changes towards both these regions, but the focal point has been United States' own international policies. The creation of the welfare state has only made Puerto Rico more dependent on the government as it has not created development. The economic status of the legal Puerto Ricans in the U.S. is no better than the illegal status of the Mexicans. The situation with Cuba will not improve until United States understands the political status of the country and Puerto Rico's independence would not be possible without United States finally admitting that the Puerto Ricans are not Americans. Puerto

Ricans have their own socially and politically distinct identities and must be treated as sovereign subjects exclusive of the United States' citizenship.

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