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The Dominican Republic in the twentieth century : notes on mobility and stratification

Sketches some major social developments in 20th-c. Dominican Republic, concentrating on the turn of the last century, the early decades of the 20th c., the Trujillo period, and the post-Trujillo era. Author pays special attention the the question of 'color', stratification, and identity and the relation between the country and Haiti. He concludes that the Dominican Republic has experienced many great changes, making society more complex and more stratified.

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THE DOMINICAN REPUBLIC IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY: NOTES ON MOBILITY AND STRATIFICATION

INTRODUCTION

Every society stresses its individuality and sees itself as exceptional.¹ When foreigners are surprised to find out that a particular country does not fit into a category they had assumed it belonged to, then it may perhaps claim to be especially exceptional.

The Dominican Republic, for one, was the only agricultural society in the Caribbean where a dominant modern sugar plantation economy developed at a time when slavery had long been abolished. And, among the Spanish-speaking countries of the Caribbean, the Dominican Republic was the only one not involved, at the end of the nineteenth century, in the Spanish-American War which was to change so drastically the course of political events in Cuba and Puerto Rico, Spanish colonies till then. Santo Domingo had gained its independence from Spain several decades earlier. In the many conferences which in 1998 commemorated the conflict and analyzed its consequences, the Dominican Republic was included *pour besoin de la cause*: the year 1898 was not a spectacular watershed in its political history as it was for its sister islands.

Yet, come to think of it, the year 1898 is of some – be it minor – symbolic significance after all, because it was then that President-dictator Ulises Heureaux made a last – and unsuccessful – attempt to convince a group of European financiers to extend him a large loan with which to cancel the debts his government owed to the San Domingo Improvement Company in the United States. In this way, “Lilís” hoped to revert to the situation of European financial dominance that had prevailed until only a few years before that.

1. This is the slightly modified text of a paper delivered at the conference “One Hundred Years of Transformation: The Caribbean and the United States 1898-1998,” City University of New York, October 13-15, 1998. I am indebted to my most constructive critic Ligia Espinal Hoetink, but have to remain solely responsible for this text.

But the sale – in 1893 – of the European financial claims to the North American company had taken place precisely because by then the recently created modern sugar industry in the country – linked as it was to North American financial and consumer markets and to North American shipping lines – had become much more important than the older tobacco and other agricultural interests which had always been – and were to remain – associated with European, especially German, firms.

This ascent of sugar over tobacco had also meant a shift of the national economic center from the Cibao Valley with its small and medium-sized locally owned tobacco farms² to the South with its large sugar plantations and *centrales* (most of them foreign-owned until the 1950s), where much of the local rural population was to become landless and, together with foreign migrant labor, part of sugar's wage-earners. To be sure, in both the tobacco and sugar sectors, the most powerful clients (who often were moneylenders as well) were foreign importers, and we should beware of a tempting idealization of "tobacco" over "sugar." Yet a case can be made for the claim that tobacco production allowed for a somewhat more evenly-spread spin-off and a larger chain of interdependence in the national economy itself, than was the case with sugar.

The increasing weight of sugar in the national economy had begun to make itself felt in the 1870s and had led to a hegemonic position within a few decades. After thus having dominated economically for more than a century, modern sugar production began to suffer a decline in the 1980s, at a time when manufacturing (in or outside of *zonas francas*) and the service industry (especially international tourism) had begun to grow robustly, in the process increasing somewhat the share of non-U.S. capital and markets in the economy and, internally, increasing the share of female non-domestic labor.

These long-term economic changes – from tobacco to sugar cultivation first, and then from primary to secondary and tertiary activities – had been accompanied and, to a point, reinforced by a notable demographic growth over the last hundred years. With close to 500,000 inhabitants at the end of the nineteenth century (Hoetink 1982:19), the country counted over 890,000 in 1920 (Gobierno Militar 1920), one and a half million in the mid-1930s, three million in 1960 (Moya Pons 1977:516), and is said to be between seven and nine million today.

With the agricultural sector unable to absorb this increase to any appreciable extent, a rural exodus was triggered leading to a dramatic growth of the larger cities, as soon as a nation-wide network of roads had been put in place. It also led to a massive migration to the United States, as soon as the political constraints on foreign travel imposed by Trujillo's regime had been abolished.

While in 1930 the rural population was still reckoned to be 84 percent of the total population, and in 1960 60 percent (Moya Pons 1977:517), today more than half of the population lives in urban areas, and about a quarter of the national

2. Of the more recent literature on the Cibao peasantry, see San Miguel 1977 and Baud 1995. It should be pointed out that in spite of the economic shift from the Cibao to the South, the majority of the country's presidents till today have their origins in the Cibao Valley.

population lives in the capital city alone. Small wonder that the service sector (in its widest, heterogeneous meaning) as well as all types of artisanal and (micro-)industrial activities also grew dramatically, especially and disproportionately in the capital (Moya Pons 1992:349).

Once the major urban centers had thus become volatile concentrations of the poor, it was in the government's political interest to keep local food available at affordable prices. As happens elsewhere in such circumstances, this policy led to increasingly unfavorable terms of trade for the agrarian sector (Moya Pons 1992:406, tab.18), hence to further impoverishment of the peasantry and small farmers, and thus to increased migration away from the rural areas.

SOME CHANGES IN SOCIAL STRATIFICATION AROUND THE TURN OF THE LAST CENTURY

As I have suggested elsewhere (Hoetink 1982:176ff), the political stability and economic changes during the Heureaux regime (1882-84 and 1886-99) fostered the formation of a national bourgeoisie. National, because the improved infrastructure made for a closer linkage between the various regional elites, and bourgeoisie because it was the result of a steady amalgamation of members of "respectable" families, often landholders who were profiting from the increasing value of their properties, and the (children of) recent immigrants – from Spain, Italy, Puerto Rico, Cuba, and the Ottoman Empire (Inoa 1991:35-58) – who had prospered as retail merchants, as importers or exporters, as technicians or professionals, or as sugar growers. Due to the long duration of Heureaux's regime, a number of his protégés, who – like himself – had their origins in the lower strata of society, had not only become prosperous but were able to give their children a good education, often abroad. This made it easier for some of them to also become part of the emerging national elite. In this way structural mobility, produced by the creation of new positions ultimately due to changes in the economic system, was joined by politico-social mobility, resulting from the direct effects of political favoritism.

Both types of mobility also affected, of course, the middle and lower rungs of the social ladders (and not always in upward direction!). Telegraphers, electricians, supervisors in the *centrales*, bookkeepers and other staff in the new enterprises and in the expanding service sector – from schools to offices – all strengthened the middle ranges of society of which, again, also foreign migrants were to form a part. In the lower sector a rural proletariat, mostly in the sugar area, was formed, which only partly originated from that area itself: it was geographical mobility which soon was to deliver most of the sugar labor force. Peasants from elsewhere in the country, not willing to give up their *conuco* but enticed by cash wage, came at first only during the *zafra*. Other seasonal laborers soon came from farther away: the first Haitians arrived in these early years, but larger numbers came from the desperately poor British Leeward Islands, who often ended

up becoming permanent residents. Among other cultural contributions, these latter contributed a Protestant note to the Dominican religious chorus and later, a notable number of them profited from considerable upward mobility.³ But the Dominican lower strata were not only drawn to the sugar fields: there were also opportunities both in the army and navy, which under Heureaux underwent some professionalization, and in the new commercial and industrial firms which were set up in those days.

Sugar and stability, then, made the social stratification more complex; its middle sectors got broader and the number of its rungs increased; at the higher and lower end of the ladder new rungs appeared (Hoetink 1985:170); not only the distance between the highest and the lowest classes grew in the process, but also the inequality between them – at first not necessarily by the poor getting poorer, but rather by the better-off getting richer. Both extremes, moreover, grew more numerous even more quickly than the population at large.

In the larger cities (of which Santiago in the Cibao Valley now had to cede its primacy to the capital in the South), new residential areas outside the old city limits were built for the higher strata, resulting in a greater geographical separation between the classes which until then had lived closer together in a smaller space. The lines of social demarcation grew more incisive, with the new bourgeoisie organizing its own social clubs, which in the next few decades laid a greater claim to exclusivity than the clubs of Spanish and other immigrants who had either arrived very recently, or, having arrived around the turn of the century, had not “made it” to the bourgeoisie a few decades later. All of these organizations were, however, at a “safe” social distance from the equally recent clubs of urban artisans or recent British Caribbean immigrants.

STABILITY AND INSTABILITY: THEIR IMPACT ON STRATIFICATION UNTIL CA. 1930

I have given some special attention, however impressionistic, to the social situation in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century because the general direction of the changes it underwent and the rough contours of its social stratification at the end of those years remained recognizable during much of the twentieth century – as long, that is, as there was no fundamental change in the country’s underlying economic structure. From this starting point and against this backdrop I shall try to indicate some of the changes that did take place subsequently.

It is a truism and not, I believe, a partisan political statement, that (all else being equal) improvements in the material infrastructure of a society, and economic expansion generally, profit more from (or at least coincide more often

3. On Haitian migrant workers there is an excellent unpublished manuscript by Orlando Inoa entitled *Braceros haitianos en ingenios azucareros dominicanos*; on labor immigration generally, see del Castillo 1978, Bryan 1979, and Hoetink 1988. On Protestant immigration, see Lockward 1976.

with) a period of political stability than from serious and recurrent social upheavals, no matter how “inevitable” or “just” these latter may be deemed to be.

Such stable periods in the present century I reckon to be a few years of “Mon” Cáceres’s government (1908-10), the period of the U.S. military occupation (1916-24), the better part of the Vázquez government (1924-30) and of the Trujillo regime, especially its long middle years (ca. 1935-55), and the long period, after the convulsions of the civil war and the foreign intervention (1965) had quietened down or been repressed, from the early 1970s till the present day, when, in a new democracy, successive parties and presidents were given a reasonably fair chance to govern, with Joaquín Balaguer being, in several respects, the more durable of the latter.

All in all, this amounts to some two thirds of the twentieth century being classified here as stable, half of it spread over the first half century, and the other half mostly concentrated without interruption in the last three decades. These stable periods brought infrastructural improvements, from roads and railroads to sewage systems, from ports and airports to schools and universities, from cultural institutions and parks to a central bank and other financial institutions and innovations, and from new industries to extensive social housing projects, as well as sprawling middle-class suburbs. And when an economic boom made itself felt in some of these stable years (the sugar boom of 1918-20; the War years and part of the 1970s – both with a sugar boom again – and the 1990s), the rhythm of expansion accelerated, just as a serious crisis like that of the 1920s and early 1930s led to a standstill or to contractions, and just as the depression in the late 1970s and early 1980s, triggered by excessive borrowing and inflation, reduced the – already low – buying power of the minimum wage⁴ and led fixed-income middle groups all over Latin America to desperation.

It should be clear, then, that these periods of stability were far from being fortunate in every way. The different economic policies in those periods were not always wise; they were certainly not free of corruption, and some of the various governments were rigid, cruel, and brutal.

Nor do I wish to deny that the years in between, of political chaos or upheaval or even civil war, were perhaps to some extent a “natural” reaction to such stable but harsh regimes, which, once gone, were sometimes followed by an explosive euphoria, and by a perhaps naive wish and hope for immediate radical change; there were also, of course, the risky ambitions of an avenging successor class: those who, armed with the appropriate ideology and sometimes with real arms as well, would want themselves to fill the vacancies left by the powers that were.

Unfortunately, the obverse was true as well. As Luis F. Mejía (1944:77) wrote of the civil wars in the first decades of the twentieth century:

4. Gladys A. Rodríguez, *Pobres e indigentes hasta cuándo?: La pobreza en América Latina y el Caribe parece encontrar una solución en las políticas macroeconómicas*, *Listín Digital*, 22 julio 1998.

Armed revolution, audacious coups, civil war, would bring about, as in effect occurred, a complete disorganization, a regression, the emergence of new military *caudillos*, of new killers, the involuntary increase of the debt [...], and finally, chaos and foreign intervention.⁵

These periods of civil wars and revolutions often witnessed an exceptional politico-social vertical mobility. The new government of the day fired its opponents and appointed its friends in all ranks and positions of the civil and military sector. Of course, these changes also occurred in more stable periods whenever one party succeeded another in power. The exceptionality of the unstable mobility lay, then, not in the number of mutations involved, but in their rapid succession.

Of special interest in this respect were the regional (military) *caudillos* whose power – though temporarily suppressed during the U.S. military occupation – persisted into the early 1930s, when it was crushed by Rafael Trujillo. These rural *caudillos* and their peasant soldiers had decided the outcome of numerous political conflicts. In times of peace they were traditionally kept content with *pensiones* or *asignaciones*; after a decisive victory they were granted official ranks and emoluments. It was a way of life and a profession that dated back to the early years of the Republic and that fitted well into the rural hierarchies and culture. Efforts by earlier presidents, like Cáceres, to stamp it out were doomed to fail (Moya Pons 1977:450, 454), as long as the state was not able (due only in part to defective means of communication) to effectively ensure its monopoly over the military and the police, a monopoly which, together with that over tax collection is, in the Weberian tradition, seen as characteristic of the modern nation-state.

After the armed forces were organized nationally and effectively, a process set in motion under the U.S. occupation and continued and expanded under Vázquez first and then by Trujillo, their rank and file, as well as part of the officer corps (especially that of the army), kept being recruited from the rural, often modest, classes. In this way the military career remained a notable channel for upward mobility, as it had been in the past.

As for careers in the civil service, job opportunities remained scarce, certainly during the first decades of the century. With a large part of the population illiterate, the clerical positions in the only slowly expanding government bureaucracy were occupied by those few with the requisite schooling (and preferably with good penmanship).

But some innovations did occur. During the U.S. occupation, the military authorities appointed a number of well-educated Dominicans in leading administrative positions. One of them, who directed the Department of Labor, claims to have been instrumental in bringing about a drastic change. Until then, for educated women, teaching had been one of the few jobs permitted outside their home. When in these years the first commercial institute with courses in type-

5. All translations from the Spanish are mine.

writing and shorthand was established, its director was persuaded by our civil servant to open his school for women with the promise that the government would welcome them. The first female alumni – seventy-eight of them – easily found a job, several of them indeed in government (de Leon 1972:57ff.).

SOME SOCIAL CHANGES DURING THE TRUJILLO PERIOD

In the following decades, with improving levels of education in the entire national territory, and with a newly housed and equipped national university, staffed by qualified Dominicans and several Spanish intellectuals who had fled from Franco's post-civil-war Spain, women not only began to dominate the lower rungs of clerical work, but several of them also came to occupy high administrative and political positions. They further started to pursue careers in medicine and in other professions at a time and in numbers which did not lag behind the rest of Latin America, and were well ahead, I believe, of many countries in Europe and North America.

During the Trujillo regime, the factual distinction between the growing public and private sectors was blurred, in the sense that *el Jefe* not only had a final say in appointments and dismissals in the government apparatus, but also in the many industries and other enterprises under his private control. In this way, the careers of a large portion of the nation's total work force depended on him personally.

Of the large number of industries and other firms established in the Trujillo period, not all were the dictator's legal property. His central economic aim was to further the country's industrialization. To this end he invited foreigners to start, or invest in, new industries, and he similarly stimulated enterprising Dominicans, at times providing part of their capital.

When his regime ended, most of these industrialists – who were the legal owners of their firms – escaped confiscation. As Moya Pons (1992:360-61) has made clear, they came to embody the hard core of the post-Trujillo business elite which, soon to be organized in the Asociación de Industrias de la República Dominicana, was to strongly influence economic policy in the coming decades and which also, directly or indirectly, contributed to the *zona franca*-industrialization, to the growth of non-traditional agriculture, and to the successful new tourist industry, all of which (together with the monetary transfers of the *dominicanos ausentes*) was to relegate the formerly predominant sugar industry to a lower rank.

The national bourgeoisie that had come into being around the end of the nineteenth century, was now supplemented by and was being amalgamated with this new industrial and business elite the leaders of which, as Frank Moya Pons observes in his *Empresarios en conflicto* (1992:360-61), were often educated abroad, were politically sophisticated, had extensive networks, and tended to intermarry. The social origins of this new grouping were diverse. Not a few of its members came themselves from the older bourgeoisie, others were "new men" who had risen to considerable heights in Trujillo's time, others again were successful first- or second-generation Spanish or Italian immigrants.

In the ensuing amalgamation a leading commercial/industrial/agricultural/professional class came into being, much larger than ever before, and supported, so to speak, by equally expansive layers of a vast and seemingly amorphous "middle class" whose needs for social contact and belonging were catered for by a whole array of sporting and social clubs.

To be sure, it had not been Trujillo's ideological intention to create or expand a national elite. It was all merely a consequence of his drive for industrialization. If anything, Trujillo was *against* the pretensions of the older elite that had reigned socially supreme when he came to power, and that had blackballed him, then still only a high-ranking military man, when he had tried to become a member of their exclusive Club Unión.

If there was a more conscious, yet at the same time "natural" inclination in Trujillo's appointment policy, it was his attention for those who came from a background similar to his own: "respectable" people from small towns or rural regions, people with some education, whose families might have a leading role to play in their local scene – in the professions, in business, in farming – but who were considered *de segunda* by the "old" bourgeoisie which had increasingly distanced itself from its own mixed origins.

It was a large and largely untapped layer to which such aspiring young men as Joaquín Balaguer and Juan Bosch also belonged, both early collaborators of the regime, the latter only for a few years. Both rose from this group – which I hesitate to call "petty bourgeoisie," a much-abused term which in much of academic literature is tainted with its nineteenth-century German connotations of little clerks and thrifty grocers which do not at all apply to the way of life and mentality of those we are dealing with here – a group perhaps without many capital goods or much cash at hand, but with its own land (not very valuable at the time), its domestic servants (not very costly either), its seigneurial aspirations, its access to schooling, its position as local *Dones* and, yes, a certain awareness of a growing breach between them and the aristocrats at the top, many of the latter promoted to that status within living memory.⁶

This is, on the other hand, not to say that Trujillo did not employ persons from this "high" elite. On the contrary, in all government departments he made intensive use of their education and talents and with few exceptions, they served him well, always aware, of course, that they, like anybody else, could never be sure how long they would keep their job.

Yet it seems fair to say that *los de segunda* profited more from an increase in income and prestige, made possible by the growth of the economy and the bureaucracy and by what were perceived as the president's favors; many of them

6. Of the Dominican historians who attach great value to the concept of "petty bourgeoisie," Juan Bosch is one of the most influential. In his *La pequeña burguesía en la historia de la República Dominicana*, he maintains that in his country the petty bourgeoisie was and still is numerically stronger than the rest of the population, consisting as it does of five "layers": from high, middle and low to poor low and very poor low (p. 3). At times the class struggle between these low and high layers was as bitter "as it would have been if we had dealt with /separate/ antagonistic classes" (p. 99).

were his staunchest supporters for many years, and the intermediate social position of this supportive group was undoubtedly of strategic political significance. All in all, the social mobility, both of the structural and the politico-social type, during the Trujillo period, especially its first two decades, was considerable. In a recent interview, ninety-two-year-old Asunción Brugal *viuda* Batlle, a member of one of Puerto Plata's leading families – of whom she gladly acknowledges that it got its wealth from its collaboration with the earlier dictator Heureaux – said that “Trujillo finished with Puerto Plata ‘society’”. From the start he appointed in his government uncouth people, without the necessary education and training, and he began to mix people” (in the same interview though, she fondly remembers some “dear friends” among the high civil servants of the regime). She also deplored the end of certain social clubs, and Trujillo's negative attitude to the “marked European influence” which had characterized Puerto Plata.⁷

Andrés L. Mateo (1998), an influential writer and sociologist of the younger generation, recently called this mobility in the early Trujillo years “gigantic,” a “pulverization of the [old] social stratification.”

THE SOCIAL CLASSES AFTER TRUJILLO: GROWTH AND DIVERGENCE

Immediately after the breakdown of the regime, an influential part of the “old families,” members of the early bourgeoisie and of the old Club Unión – long since disbanded – tried hard to regain the predominant position they had held well into the 1920s. Their political party Unión Cívica Nacional clearly and perhaps rather naively announced its restorative intentions, demanding a drastic overhaul of the entire civil service and the armed forces, thereby creating a sense of dramatic insecurity among the tens of thousands who had served the government of the last thirty years and who were now held publicly and collectively responsible (as some of them, to be sure, were) for reproachable conduct while in service.

The first post-Trujillo elections were won by Juan Bosch's Partido Revolucionario Dominicano (PRD), on the face of it, not because of any ideological preference, but because Bosch had been deliberately measured in his evaluation of the past regime and had promised to generally keep the civil service and the armed forces intact, using the slogan “*borrón y cuenta nueva*” (let bygones be bygones). In this way he assured his party of the support of those many voters who wanted continuity, at least insofar as their own jobs were concerned. He thus became the guarantor of the achievements of *los de segunda* (and much of the temerarious mass below them) against the risk of a restoration of the *ancien régime*.

After the death of the dictator, and before fleeing the country, his eldest son had donated Trujillo's large sugar interests “to the Nation” (Crassweller

7. *Listín Diario*, 14 febrero 1999.

1966:445). Many of his other properties were soon after expropriated, except when co-owners/business friends or marionettes of the dictator succeeded in having their claims legally recognized (Moya Pons 1992:79ff.). This “state patrimony” gave all successive governments economic assets – with their attendant potential for patronage – of a size truly exceptional for a non-socialist country, as Moya Pons (1992:79) has rightly observed.

The state had formally become the largest employer. The favors which victorious parties in the newly democratic republic could grant were and are more substantial than ever before. Small wonder that every political party, once in power, was reluctant to abolish these spectacular opportunities for politico-social mobility, including featherbedding and corruption. Only recently, after ample and longlasting proof of the disastrous economic consequences of these practices, a plan for partial privatization of these state enterprises was approved and set in motion.

In countries where no one in the entire public (and very few, to be sure, in the private) sector can foresee when one will lose one’s job, where the chances of finding another one are very scarce, and where there is no welfare system to speak of, conformity to the guidelines for civic behavior in a democratic and lawful society is more exacting, and preserving one’s moral integrity is many times harder than in the few more privileged societies of this planet, and even there – as we know – it is not easy. For the poorer part of the population excuses are easily found; those of the better-off who easily fall prey to their greed, are perhaps (also) driven by their fear that one’s fortunes may change very quickly, and opportunities are rare. Perhaps the mood of understanding embodied in the recent proposal in the Dominican Congress to proclaim a general amnesty for all civil servants who since 1978 have been accused of unlawful financial transactions, should be seen in this light.⁸ (Fortunately, the proposal did not receive enough backing).

At any rate, corruption has been, and still is, a well-tried vehicle for vertical ascent, while at the same time it is, of course, undermining the reliability of the state’s institutions.

At this point we should perhaps remind ourselves again that by 1960, at the end of the dictatorship, the country only had some three million inhabitants, about one third of what it has now. The capital city had grown rapidly, though, in the previous ten years: from 150,000 in 1950 to 367,000 in 1960 (Instituto de Estudios del Caribe 1962:2). Larger demographic shifts were still to come, however, including rural-urban migration and emigration to the United States. By 1981, the number of Dominicans in the United States was estimated at between 300,000 and 500,000, virtually all of them having arrived after 1961, and especially after the civil war and foreign intervention of 1965, when violence and a critical economic situation had triggered an exodus (del Castillo 1981:153ff.).

8. *Listín Digital*, 10/11 julio, 1998.

In varying ways, this vast group of *dominicanos ausentes* (which has been growing fast since then) exerts some influence on stratification and mobility in their country of origin. The least noted perhaps is the lessening of demographic pressure and hence of job competition; if only because of the continuing high natural growth rate – some 3 percent – plus the steady immigration (especially from Haiti) into the country. Great importance, on the other hand, is attributed to the effect of the remittances from overseas, not only to support relatives but also to invest in houses, land, and businesses, thereby providing work and jobs. There are also migrants who return and who exert a definite influence, both economically and in social behavior, on their local environment. I need not emphasize that, unfortunately, not all such influences are seen as beneficial, and that not all cases of – sometimes spectacular – enrichment and ensuing upward economic (if not always social) mobility are a result of legal and socially approved activity. (This goes, it should be said, for other societies too, today and in the past, though perhaps moreso for the Caribbean region where general poverty is combined with a long tradition of smuggling and piracy, often depicted as picturesque and the longer ago the deeds were done the more respectable it was.)

The drug trade comes to mind here, but also – to mention a quite different category – the work of the many women who, in countries all over the globe, earn their money as what is euphemistically called *bailarinas*, and whose houses or *colmados* bought with their savings, often located in the poorest sections of the country, are, not without pride, pointed out to the visitor (Imbert Brugal 1991). There are, to be sure, more felicitous role models than these; we may think of successful professional baseball players or musicians, but the chances of becoming one of them are, unfortunately, much smaller.

The wish to leave the rural areas in search of a better life got stronger rather than weaker in the twentieth century. There were roads built which made previously isolated areas accessible; there were laws that abolished and split up for private use the old *terrenos comuneros* (1911), or that stimulated the uninhibited expansion of sugar plantations, expropriating large numbers of small peasants in the process, or tax laws, like that of 1910, that harmed hundreds of small rural rum producers with their *alambiques* (Moya Pons 1977:453), or a property law (1919) that was seriously hurting the Cibao peasantry (San Miguel 1995:48-49); there were also, in these earlier decades, the periods of regional military and political violence, when rural dwellers were traditionally submitted to extortion or theft, and inclined to flee; there was, later, the rapidly increasing scarcity of available land for peasant farming, in part related to the dramatic population increase, in part due to rationalizing tendencies in agriculture, leading to larger and more capital-intensive units.

In the teeming cities where the migrants headed for, they arrived with the illusion of finding work for themselves and for their many children; they also hoped these children might get some schooling which indeed, well into the 1960s, was often of acceptable quality, and was free.

But in the massive migratory groundwave from the 1960s on (and sustained generally by the rapid population growth), both the educational and the medical systems were tragically drowning. Government schools and free government clinics deteriorated, giving rise to a large number of private schools and private clinics, all competing with each other and all without external control. Their quality varied greatly, as did their fees. The poorest inhabitants could not afford any of them and remained dependent on increasingly deficient government services.

Similarly, part of the system of higher education where teachers and medical doctors had to be trained, was also to reach a state of near collapse. New private institutions, from high schools to universities, were established, their quality varying from more than acceptable to very deplorable indeed, and all demanding impressive fees, prohibitive for many, if not most, aspiring students among the poor. The old State University quickly fell prey to rampant politization. Imitating examples from abroad, it further compounded matters by establishing a policy of open admission (and, in effect, open and permanent free study). Its enrollment, which in 1920 had amounted to 169 (Gobierno Militar 1920:116) and which in the early 1960s did not exceed a few thousand, by the end of the 1970s had reached some 35,000 students, and today is estimated at some 100,000.

At first sight, such an explosive growth should be welcomed as a clear sign of the “democratization” of higher education. And indeed, as one observer José del Castillo (1981:151-52) noted:

After Trujillo's death, what with the opening up of higher education to the *sectores populares* by way of liberalization of admission mechanisms, the expansion of the educational credit system, and the establishment of multiple types of scholarships, university education becomes the paramount channel for mobility, “*irrumpiendo el negro en forma masiva en el escenario académico.*” Since then [...] the blacks have begun to break the “poverty cycle” by profiting without hesitation from the opportunities offered by the educational system. If in the Trujillo period the military career had provided the best chances for black mobility in Dominican society, in the period thereafter formal education has become its pre-eminent substitute.

It is certainly true that, even more than before, the urgent hope to improve one's prospects by way of education is palpable everywhere, also – and perhaps especially – amongst those whose other resources are precariously scarce. Everyone knows in his immediate environment examples of near-desperate sacrifices made for the sake of obtaining an education, and it is also true that the students at the congested campus of the Universidad Autónoma appear more than ever before to fairly represent the Dominican population at large.

But some caution about the meaning of all this may be well advised. Already back in 1977 the Chilean expert in higher education, Felipe Richardson, noted in a scathing report that there were no reliable data at all about those few (“*algunos*”) “students of modest social origins” who allegedly had succeeded in graduating from this institution. Of all those students who had begun their stud-

ies simultaneously, and were supposed to graduate in 1975, only 15 percent had actually done so. In 1964, the comparable percentage still had been 60. With students from the lower social strata having to pass through increasingly defective primary and secondary schools, the number of *bachilleres* (those who have finished secondary school) is alarmingly low to start with. Small wonder that at the State University, a slow process – costly for all concerned – of (negative) selection weeds out many of them. For this university, the solution, as Richardson emphasized, lies not in simply demanding more money from government, as it is wont to do, but in vigorously tackling its harmful deficiencies in organization, teaching, and research. Richardson's diagnosis and recommendations are still valid today, and as recently as June 1998, after a plan for some changes in the evaluation of student achievements had finally been proposed, we could witness the predictable riots, after which the matter was left to further consideration.

It is a perverse irony that, with its leading student factions often waving the banner of revolutionary action in favor of the underprivileged, the State University has deteriorated into a corrupt institution, infested by political rivalries and featherebedding; there are surely also members of the academic community who are well-intentioned and capable, but the institutional shortcomings seem to leave them with a sense of impotence. The degrees the university confers are often of such a doubtful quality that they do not warrant the expectations created amongst those meant to profit from the university's "democratization," nor justify the sacrifices many of these very poor people make to attain them.

Once they leave this type of university, diploma in hand, they will have to compete with alumni from private, better, and more expensive institutions. (Some of them perhaps would have been better served if they had enrolled in less pretentious but more solid intermediary technical institutes.)

Those of us who can look back on events and trends in the Dominican Republic for the last forty years or so, are all awed, I think, by the dramatic expansion of the population, of the cities, of the wealthy and middle classes, of the lower middle sector, and definitely, also of the poor and very poor.

While this staggering expansion took place, the lines of demarcation were, just as happened in the early twentieth century, more clearly drawn: between the classes, especially those at either pole of the social spectrum: between the parts of town they inhabit; between the free or inexpensive, but often deficient, public schools for the very poor children and the expensive private schools for the children of the well-off; and, similarly, between the free or cheap public hospitals, poorly equipped and staffed, and the well-run private clinics. This is not to deny, of course, that a vast, varied, and expanding intermediate sector makes itself strongly felt as well.

The times of the good old *escuela pública* where it was not rare for a competent teacher to have rich and poor in his or her classroom, lie behind us and belong to the memories of today's elderly.

The same disintegration of public services we find in such sectors as security (private security guards vs public police), and energy (private vs collective electricity generation). In all these cases the good private service is for the better-off, and an impoverished and defective service is for the poorer section of the public.

This dividing-up of essential services leads to a serious loss of unifying strands in the social fabric; the sense of national community is weakened when a small part of the population is no longer affected by the dramatically deteriorating quality of what were once common goods.

DOMINICAN EXCEPTIONS? A FEW NOTES ON "COLOR," STRATIFICATION, AND IDENTITY

Of course, this atrophy and degradation of formerly common goods and spaces is not peculiar to the Dominican Republic; it started earlier in other societies, and can today be observed in very prosperous ones.

Indeed, the country's exceptionality, at which I hinted by way of introduction, is, for our purposes, largely limited to the instances I mentioned there. In many other respects developments in the Dominican Republic in the twentieth century were similar to those of its neighbors. This goes without saying for global changes such as rapid population growth, urbanization, and industrialization. But it goes for several more specific phenomena as well.

For instance, irrespective of their particular political history, virtually all Hispanic-Caribbean societies today – indeed, much of the entire Caribbean and of Central America – have stronger economic links with and are undergoing a stronger cultural impact from the United States than a century ago; the modern media and means of transportation as well as the recent, very active presence of a substantial part of their populations in that country are contributing to that impact.

Further – to mention an entirely different phenomenon – virtually all sovereign countries of South America have known dictatorships of one type or another, and some of the social effects, such as an increased mobility for certain middle groups, which I alluded to when discussing the Trujillo regime, have also been observed elsewhere and explained in a similar fashion. In many of those countries it was also under regimes akin to Gino Germani's "unifying autocracies"⁹ that the state's effective control over its territory and over the levying of taxes was firmly established.

Some such regimes, from autocratic monarchies in nineteenth-century continental Europe and Japan, to republican autocracies, both at the end of the nineteenth and in the twentieth century, in Latin America and elsewhere, provided the conditions for a first spurt of, centrally financed, industrialization, a process

9. Gino Germani (1962:147ff.). He also refers to the (quasi-) "democratic" character of some caudillistic regimes, whose leader was "a menudo de origen popular," compared with the "tendencias aristocratizantes y hasta monárquicas de las élites liberales" (p. 148).

which in the earliest industrial nations had been achieved at a more leisurely pace. There are grounds for classifying Trujillo's regime in this category.¹⁰

It is on purpose that I emphasize here such commonalities, because one might well argue that an influential part of Dominican historiography has long been characterized by an emphasis on the country's uniqueness, and a negative uniqueness at that. It would not be hard to collect a number of book titles, from *El gran pesimismo dominicano* to *La República Dominicana: Una ficción* to illustrate this point. Nor would it be difficult to demonstrate how this emphasis has influenced both native and foreign opinion. (I hasten to add that a similar pessimistic national outlook can be found in the historiography of other Latin American countries, with a similar claim to uniqueness.)

Now that I am to pay some attention to "color" or "race" as an ingredient in Dominican social stratification, I am entering a field where, I believe, this penchant for somberly inclined exceptionalism is particularly pronounced. There are two causes for this. One is general and methodological: many of us write on this topic while concentrating exclusively on Dominican society. Such a lack of comparative perspective clearly favors a tendency to use *sui generis* explanations, to stress the idiosyncrasy of Dominican phenomena, to assume they are all highly peculiar. In such a way, no balance can be found between what is common to a certain type of structures and histories, and what is, indeed, only typical of the one society being studied.

There is, further, an ideological component at work: rather than viewing certain collective sentiments, judgments, and prejudices as products of long historical processes and pervasive structures, some authors, with a predilection for moral judgments, prefer to blame them on one narrowly circumscribed, specific situation, government or political leader, thereby implicitly – and placidly – absolving the rest of history and the rest of society.

Differing between themselves as the Hispanic-Caribbean societies do in certain aspects of their slavery past, their economic history, their social composition and their "race" relations, they still have very much in common in these fields, and, of course, in their language and their culture generally.

The exceptionalism I hinted at, is not directed at the position of Dominican "blacks." It may be observed in passing that if one were to look for an Hispanic-Caribbean exception on this point, there would be good arguments for the notion that the overt and flagrant cases of – at times public – discrimination of "blacks" in the nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth century were to be found in Cuba rather than in Puerto Rico or Santo Domingo.¹¹

10. Frank Moya Pons (1992:351), carefully draws some parallels in this respect between the history of industrialization in the Dominican Republic and Japan. This is perhaps also the place to observe that Emelio Betances (1995), correctly in my view, sees the Trujillo dictatorship not as a *sui generis* product of the U.S. intervention (as is the most common version), but as part of a longer process that has its roots in the nineteenth century.

11. On Cuba, see Knight 1970; on comparisons in the Caribbean, Hoetink 1971 and 1985.

Rather, the alleged Dominican exception centers on the idea that, more than elsewhere, “the Dominican” wants to deny or de-emphasize the “African” component in his people and in his person. Of course, this inclination by itself can easily be observed in *all* societies where a large part of the population has been subordinated by “whites” for many generations; a subordination, moreover, which runs parallel with, is reinforced by, and is a reflection of the world’s “racial” stratification. By “subordination” I do not refer especially or exclusively to economic ranking, but also to the predominance of “white” norms and images (Hoetink 1971 and 1973).

And in all those societies, and perhaps especially in those where the “blacks” are, for better or worse, not perceived – nor do they perceive themselves – as one solid ascriptive category, a great many “color” gradations are recognized and named, each with its own distinct social value. These designations are not necessarily always pejorative; on the contrary, they are often euphemisms, meant to avoid the general sensitivity about this subject.

Further, in all three Spanish-speaking societies in the Caribbean – where the sense of historical continuity between the pre-colonial past and the ensuing (Spanish-) colonial period must be greater than in those islands where new colonizers drove the Spanish out and started history, so to speak, all over again – it is more common for a member of the mixed-color strata to attribute his or her dark skin color to a remote Amerindian ancestor rather than to a “black” one, and it is impolite to question this. (In Cuba, president Batista was commonly called “el Jefe indio.”)

This being the case, it is hard to understand why some authors maintain that the Dominican “white wish” and lack of “black” self-esteem are particularly pronounced, and that the frequent use of the term *indio* when speaking of (or to) dark-skinned people is one of the symptoms.¹² It is hard to see why this term is more than just one of those euphemisms I mentioned, and perfectly comparable to *mestizo*, widely used in many Afro-American countries as a substitute for the socially less acceptable *mulato*.¹³

An aggravating circumstance to some is that the term was allegedly imposed by Trujillo as a substitute for *mulato* as “proven” by the frequency it is used in the *cédula de identidad*, an identity card common to much of Latin America,

12. There is no unanimity of the meaning of *indio*. I have heard it often referred to as a special tone of reddish-brown; Pérez Cabral (1967:72) also considers it one of many color gradations such as *mulato claro*, *negro lavado*, *tipo canela*, etc. The historian Rubén Silié (1981:164) argues that in the eighteenth century the term was applied to themselves by Haitian blacks entering the Spanish colony of Santo Domingo, so as to “legitimate” their presence vis-à-vis the creolized blacks there. Later, he writes, the term was applied by white creoles to creole blacks. However, in the French colony of St. Domingue in the eighteenth century it was not uncommon either for elite mulattoes to request an official recognition of their “Indian” origins (Bonniol 1992:101). In the opinion of Bernardo Vega (1981:52-53), the term *indio* today is used for mulattoes rather than blacks.

13. The Dominicans of course do not believe, as is sometimes said, that they are *actually* native Americans! When Dominicans see that a foreigner is trying to take advantage of them, the tried and trusted reply is “You don’t believe we are Indians, do you?”

which he introduced in the country. This argument would be more convincing, however, if the dictator had ordered that also in the censuses of his regime the word *mulato* should no longer be used, but this is not the case.¹⁴ The reason for this difference seems simple: one's personal identity card was constantly used for all kinds of purposes and read by others; it therefore had to conform to the socially acknowledged preference for certain "racial" terms. The census data, on the other hand, were anonymous, without a need to take individual preferences into account. Here then, the official, "scientific" term of the period was used.

While evaluating ideas and practices related to "race," some of us, I am afraid, do not always take into account that at least until the late 1950s an influential part of the intellectual establishment, world-wide, still adhered to notions and condoned practices that are considered reprehensible today. In the United States, which was to play such a laudable and pioneering role in instigating legal change in this area, racial segregation in education and public transportation was still common in the 1950s in several states, lynchings did still occur, and in some serious psychological studies a careful distinction was made between "Americans" and "Negroes" (Hoetink 1971:155).

Small wonder that it is also easy to detect "racist" notions in the work of the vast majority of those Cuban, Puerto Rican, or Dominican¹⁵ intellectuals from virtually all political persuasions, who were active in the years prior to the introduction in the United States of drastic changes in legal rules and practices, in public language, and in the codes of public behavior related to "race" relations, changes which in turn did not miss their effect in their own societies.

In the process, certain terms acquired a less equivocal meaning than they had before. Thus, in the twentieth century's early decades, the word "race" was at times also used to denote a "people," as the odes to the "British race" or the less than flattering descriptions in the United States of the immigrating Italian or Polish "races" demonstrate. Here, though, the notion of biological determinism was much weaker (if at all present) than when the word was used for the world's large (and ill-definable) phenotypical categories. Today, the word is used in this latter meaning only. In Spanish, where the word *raza* also had these two meanings, a similar process – perhaps under international influence – took place:

14. Witness Pérez Cabral (1967:113ff.). The notion that it was the Trujillo regime which established *indio* as an "official and popular description of Dominican race" can be found, based only on the *cédula* argument, in Howard (1997:71ff.); a revised version is to be published at the end of 2000 by Signal Books, Oxford.

15. Of these, Joaquín Balaguer is commonly singled out. This is understandable, given his political significance. He allowed his *La realidad dominicana*, dating from 1937, to be republished with only slight alterations as *La isla al revés: Haití y el destino dominicano* in 1983, when the author, nearly eighty, was president. Its dated racist opinions immediately drew much critical attention. A critical study of Balaguer as eclectic social thinker should also include an essay, originally written and published in 1947, later reprinted as *Prólogo* for José Ramón López, *El gran pesimismo dominicano*, in which he approvingly quotes Ruth Benedict's conviction that "race" only becomes a source of conflict when it acquires the characteristics of a class.

recently the internationally celebrated *Día de la raza* was changed into *Día de la hispanidad*. This latter term, however, meets with criticism from some who, suspecting a suggestion of biological determinism, think the *Día* should also explicitly celebrate the Amerindian and “black” “races,” while others, emphasizing the cultural connotations of the word, believe that the non-“Hispanic” cultures should be included in the celebration. In judging some authors’ older work, and the use they make of terms like these, it would be fair, I think, not to apply our current definitions to terms used differently in another period.¹⁶

In a country like the Dominican Republic, with a population which for a large part is of mixed (mulatto) origin, judgments about acts of discrimination are not always easy and unequivocal. There is certainly, especially in the area of selection for more prominent positions, a bias in favor of “whites” or of mixed-color strata that more closely approach the “whiter” end of the continuum; such preferences are clearly also at work in the field of more intimate social relations such as the selection of marriage partners.

All this is not, in itself, different from the other Spanish-speaking societies in the Caribbean. It is perhaps typical, though, of the Dominican Republic that its mixed-color strata, numerous as they are, occupy a vast number of positions in all walks of life, which means that persons looking for a job are not seldom selected or rejected by members of the mixed strata, and any suspicion of bias may well be directed toward them. In this respect there is, perhaps, a greater similarity with certain smaller Caribbean islands.

On the other hand, the line between “black” and “mixed” is a fluid one, and so is, to a certain extent, the line between “white” and the “lightest” strata of the mixed-color group. Nor are *all* the richest or prestigious people “white” or light-skinned, or *all* the poorest people very dark or “really black.” Yet it is certainly a fact that the majority of the industrial and commercial elite today are perceived as “white” or light-skinned, their numbers having increased during the past one hundred years, as we saw, by the absorption of successful immigrants. And it is also true that a majority of the very poor are dark- or black-skinned and that this economic category, as we also saw, has grown drastically in this period, both by natural increase and immigration.

In recent decades, as already suggested, also in the Dominican Republic changes have taken place in the “racial” discourse, in the use of certain symbols, in attitudes expressed verbally or in written form, all of these expressive of a new “political correctness.” Without careful and detailed research it is impossible to determine the concrete effects of these changes.

The Dominican immigrants in the United States will, I’m sure, often make comparisons between the “racial” culture and structure of their native society and those of their adopted country, and it is tempting to speculate that, depending on

16. In an interesting article “Hispanidad and National Identity in Santo Domingo,” in which he compares the use by Balaguer and Franco of terms such as these, Meindert Fennema (1998) does, however, take their historical context into account.

their position in the Dominican color-spectrum, some will feel attracted to the openness and combativeness in much of the North American “racial” discourse, while others feel embittered about being grouped in a “racial” category to which at home they never belonged. The intriguing question is whether such experiences change anything at all within the U.S. Dominican community itself, apart from, perhaps, a greater urge than before – at least for a large portion of the “mixed” strata of this community – to preserve their “Dominicanness” for as long as possible. But these are just guesses, and the same goes for the possible influence of these immigrants on the situation in their country of origin. Perhaps the impact of U.S. television programs there is at least as great – or small. Recently, Silvio Torres-Saillant (1998) has suggestively addressed some of these questions.

In the “social sections” of the Dominican press and television, and in the commercials directed at the middle and upper classes, there is – and there always was – a tendency to prefer the light-colored and “white” and to de-emphasize the “real black,” except in “appropriate” cases. One need not leave the country to realize that this is not an exclusively Dominican phenomenon: a look at the widely popular soap operas of Mexican, Venezuelan, or Brazilian origin, shown on Dominican television, suffices.

While this whole set of practices and preferences decidedly do not have their origins in the Trujillo regime,¹⁷ it is undeniable that the pervasive influence, directly or indirectly, of his government on education and the media, plus the improvements in infrastructure and communication realized in that period, made it possible for the emphasis on the Amerindian and Spanish-colonial past and heritage, on the importance of the Spanish language as part of this heritage *and* as an identity marker, and on the Catholic Church for similar reasons, to reach the entire population with more insistence than before. It was all part of a nationalist ideology for which the ingredients had already been “invented” much earlier (and were, to be sure, not at all exceptional)¹⁸; the appetite for them had certainly also been stimulated by the humiliating experience of the U.S. military intervention.

The Trujillo regime in its thirty years has committed a number of atrocities and many other reprehensible acts and it has been accused of more. I do not, however, think that it has convincingly been accused of fomenting or practising more actual “racist” discrimination in Dominican society than any of its prede-

17. There exists an extensive literature on “race” and “racism” in the Dominican Republic. An excellent overview as well as an intelligent analysis can be found in San Miguel 1997.

18. Any identity, of course, exists by the grace of boundaries or markers which are perceived as clearly distinguishing it from others. Nationalist rhetoric is based on the celebration of such markers. Where a nation-state finds its origins in a war against another nation, this antagonist will generally be depicted for centuries to come in stark, often (quasi-)racist, terms. European examples abound. In Dutch national ideology, for example, such a demonic quality has always been attributed to the Spanish. When a neighboring state is perceived as the main antagonist, as the Dutch have seen Germany since World War II, feelings become even more virulent, if possible, and might profitably be subjected to the diagnostic insights which the Dutch authors Meindert Fennema and Troetje Loewenthal have used in their *La construcción de raza y nación en la República Dominicana* (1987).

cessors or, indeed, successors. On the contrary, the “populist” character of the regime worked, as several notable cases seem to suggest, rather in the opposite direction. Here, as so often, we do well to separate ideology from practice, the nationalist rhetorical image-mongering, shockingly one-sided as it strikes us today, from the well-established social practices, motivated by the reality of political expediency, kinship, geographic origin, and clientelism.

“HAITI” AND THE DOMINICAN STRATIFICATION

Efforts to defend and settle the border areas between the Dominican Republic and Haiti date back from right after the Treaty of Rijswijk (1697) when France acquired the Western one third of the island. Throughout the nineteenth century, and in the first decades of the twentieth century, various governments were active in this respect. Trujillo’s policy of fostering a “*dominicanización de la frontera*” was, then, neither new nor exceptional.

Further, the events leading to Santo Domingo’s independence from Haiti (1844), after two decades of “union” or “occupation,” as well as the various Haitian invasions before and after this period, have led to a long tradition of mutually adverse collective sets of prejudices, judgments, and images of both peoples – the common Dominicans and Haitians included.¹⁹

Throughout their history, belligerent speeches, defiant acts, and aggressive plans could be heard and seen on both sides of the border, from virtually all political leaders and from much of the two intellectual establishments. The Haitians were more threatening in the nineteenth century when they were numerically and economically superior; from the beginning of the twentieth century on, the power relations were reversed; even so, the old irredentist notion (dating back to the turn of the eighteenth century) of an island, “une et indivisible,” could be heard again in one of Haiti’s very recent governments.

For the Dominicans the most shameful point in these relations undoubtedly was reached with the 1937 Dominican mass massacre in the border area. This crime, together with the nationalist and anti-Haitian stance of the Trujillo government, has suggested to many commentators since that Trujillo’s and, by extension, Dominican racism found and finds an outlet in their aversion of Haitians, and that the relations between the two countries, including, of course, the irritant of degrading collective-hiring practices of Haitian laborers for the sugar industry, were inextricably intertwined with Dominican collective racist prejudices only. In international fora such a point of view is still often expressed. Recently, it nearly paralyzed Dominican public opinion and policy, because pro-

19. For perceptions of the “common” Dominican, see Cordero 1975. It should be noted, however, that all this did not prevent frequent social contacts, not only in the border area, about which Lauren Derby has written her 1994 prize-winning article, but also between urban elite families in certain periods (Hoetink 1992:132-45).

posals and measures, considered to be acceptable if taken in other countries, ran the danger of being rejected as racist.²⁰

The pity of all this is that it seriously obstructs our view. There are, one would think, two major problems here which demand two different approaches. One problem is that of mutually adverse images and opinions and a general lack of knowledge and information. All the obvious ways to overcome this – e.g., more travel, more cooperation, more exchanges of persons and cultural goods, more common symposia – are now being put into practice, often with foreign aid, and this is useful, on condition that such efforts do not hide ulterior motives.

The second problem is that of two contiguous countries surrounded by sea, with a common border of great porosity, one country ranking somewhere in the middle of the world economic scale, the other near the very bottom, and with desperately little prospects of improving its situation even in the longer term, due to such problems as a very high demographic pressure, extremely low schooling rates, nearly maximal deforestation, and severe erosion; problems which do not lend themselves to a quick fix.

There are those who prefer to paper over the vast macro-economic differences between the two countries. In some foreign capitals, the convenient conviction that both are “black” and “poor” does not allow for politically complicating nuances. Others, closer to these countries, take a similar stance, this time out of feelings of sympathy or solidarity, or perhaps out of fear for being considered prejudiced. It all clouds the discussion, and hinders the search for viable and mutually beneficial solutions.

For as long as both nations exist, significant lower-class geographic mobility has only been directed from West to East. Cruel treatment and very low wages may have triggered international protests from time to time, but have not weakened the Haitian readiness to cross the border.

This entirely understandable drift of large numbers of Haitians to the Dominican Republic is met with conflicting responses. On the one hand, complaints in the media are phrased in terms of health risks, danger of more crime, damage to national and cultural values and other perceived or real risks. On the other hand, employers continue contracting Haitians for very low wages in agriculture and in construction, leaving the nationals – if these have not already left – without work. (A stronger state, one might argue²¹ might find a humane solution by enforcing “Dominican” wages for both Dominicans and foreigners, or by a “civilized” repatriation, but we know of stronger states elsewhere, incapable of such enforcement.)

Clearly, political stability in Haiti and the start of viable, manageable, and “absorbable” development projects which at least create some hope in that country, would also be in the interest of Santo Domingo and, indeed, of the wider

20. For an effort to describe and analyze recent developments in this area, see Corten & Duarte 1996.

21. See Vega (1991:233-55); also referred to in Corten & Duarte (1996:98).

Caribbean. The Haitian dilemma has, indeed, international dimensions and its solution, if one exists, cannot depend solely on its neighbor. Isn't there, after all, even under the most lenient of definitions, a limit as to how many unskilled and destitute immigrants the Dominican Republic can absorb before fatally jeopardizing its own economic viability?

In the meantime, the continuing willingness and capacity of Haitians to cross the border illegally, uncertain of finding work even for wages unacceptable to Dominicans, has already created a formidable urban *Lumpenproletariat* of migrants, a pool of unskilled labor, with a negative effect on the (already deplorable) position and chances for upward mobility of the lowest strata of Dominican society, many of whom belong to a similar pool. In this critical situation public demands "to protect the national labor market" are to be expected, and recently a committee with precisely such a name was formed,²² reminding us of similar campaigns in Cuba and Santo Domingo in the 1930s.

The bitter irony of all this is that while the higher and middle classes have been growing, and are not wary of their economic future, what with expanding *zonas francas*, tourism, and other service industries, it is the badly trained Dominican workers who have to leave their traditional niches in agriculture and construction, and to join a mass of urban poor which, as we have seen, has been growing quickly anyhow in the last decades.

The overall picture of changes in mobility and stratification in the last hundred years is, like all pictures, a mixture of light, grey, and darkness. It is a moving picture, with great, at times nearly cataclysmic, changes generally in the direction of greater complexity, the ladder of stratification growing longer and wider. Many families, looking back, will consider their relative positions improved; some have remained behind, suffering a sense of stagnation, and yet another group, probably larger than the others, has seen its position, low as it already was, deteriorate further.²³ To improve their situation is a daunting and urgent task, of vital importance to the society at large and its stability.

22. *Listín Digital*, 30 junio 1998. No further details were given.

23. According to some 'macro'-studies, indicators such as infant mortality, nutrition of children under six, life expectancy, and illiteracy, have shown an improvement over the last three decades. Also, between 1986 and 1992, poverty is believed to have diminished generally, except in households headed by someone without any schooling. Households with more than seven members are at a disadvantage as well (Jaime Aristy & Andy Dauhajre, *Efectos de las políticas macroeconómicas y sociales sobre la pobreza en la República Dominicana*; this is part of a recent UNDP report, edited by Enrique Ganuza, and mentioned in a review by Rodríguez, 1998; I do not know the report itself). If these favorable data are reliable, there still remains the threat of an underclass with unschooled heads of large households.

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