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RACE AND NATION IN THE DOMINICAN REPUBLIC

Coloring the Nation: Race and Ethnicity in the Dominican Republic. DAVID HOWARD. Oxford: Signal; Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 2001. x + 227 pp. (Paper US\$ 19.95)

Race and Politics in the Dominican Republic. ERNESTO SAGÁS. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2000. xii + 161 pp. (Cloth US\$ 49.95, Paper US\$ 24.95)

Peasants and Religion: A Socioeconomic Study of Dios Olivorio and the Palma Sola Movement in the Dominican Republic. JAN LUNDIUS & MATS LUNDAHL. London: Routledge, 2000. xxvi + 774 pp. (Cloth US\$ 135.00)

The social and political relations between the Dominican Republic and Haiti, and especially their racial and ethnic contents, are extremely difficult to approach in an even-handed and unbiased way. Much ink has been spilled over the conflictive relations between these two countries, and on race relations in the Dominican Republic. Much of what has been said must be considered unfounded or biased, not to mention sensationalist. The books under review try to provide new insights into the issue and at the same time to steer clear of these problems.

Let me start with some generally accepted facts. Haiti and the Dominican Republic, as two sovereign countries, exist side by side on one and the same island. Apart from this geographical coexistence, they have experienced different histories. Haiti was the pearl in the crown of French colonialism – with slavery as its mainstay – until the slave revolt of 1789 put an end to European colonial domination and created the “Black Republic” of Haiti. In the eastern part of the island, the Spanish colony of Santo Domingo had a lingering existence in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, when the motherland largely neglected its poor colonial possession. Slavery had never been very

important on the island, and this produced a mixed mulatto population. The struggle for independence brought the two forcefully together. Several wars ensued, and between 1822 and 1844, Haitian forces occupied the Spanish-speaking part of the island, which regained its independence, becoming the Dominican Republic. The new nation-state was repeatedly invaded by Haitian troops.

In the late nineteenth century the Dominican Republic became, for a variety of reasons, the stronger and more prosperous of the two. In the process, the population started to see itself as a nation of light-skinned mulattoes, euphemistically presenting its identity as *indio*. Every year, the Dominican sugar plantations employed thousands of Haitian cane-cutters who had to work under harsh conditions. This immigration and the existence of many poor Haitian immigrants in the agricultural border regions ultimately led to strong anti-Haitian feelings within Dominican society. In 1937, General Trujillo decided to undertake the infamous *matanza* in which many thousands of poor Haitian immigrants in the frontier zones were killed. The border region was forcefully "Dominicanized," as the process was euphemistically called. After Trujillo's assassination in 1961, anti-Haitianism continued to play an important part in Dominican politics. It was one of the central elements of the political program of Joaquín Balaguer, repeatedly president of the country.

In *Coloring the Nation and Race and Politics in the Dominican Republic*, David Howard and Ernesto Sagás each try to analyze and explain the persistence of anti-Haitian sentiment in the Dominican Republic. They follow similar paths in their research methods and perspectives, as well as in the structure of their analyses. Like most previous publications, both of these books focus exclusively on the Dominican side of the story. The perspectives of Haitian politicians, government officials, and representatives of the Haitian population are absent. Both Howard and Sagás complement written evidence such as newspapers, government documents, and the writings of Dominican intellectuals with interviews with members of the Dominican population. The impact of these interviews on their conclusions is not completely clear, but both books present direct citations and some quantitative analysis of the interviews. Both books also describe the historical development of political relations between Haiti and the Dominican Republic and analyze the gradual emergence of the myth of the Dominican *indio*, treating it as a clear sign of Dominican racism. They demonstrate the importance of the Trujillo dictatorship for the emergence of a virulent anti-Haitian nationalism and show how in the last decades of the twentieth century, Dominican society was pervaded by anti-Haitian ideas. They both point at the failed bid for presidential power by black candidate José Francisco Peña Gómez in 1994 and 1996 in order to stress the political importance of this racism, and they conclude that real

democracy in the Dominican Republic will be possible only if these racist influences can be eradicated.

There are, however, differences. Howard devotes a large chapter to racial ideas in Dominican literature and analyzes how Dominican migration to the United States has influenced racial stereotypes within the Dominican population. More importantly, Howard is clearly inspired by U.S. perceptions of race and racism, which take off from a dualistic black-white contrast. He argues that the Dominican anti-Haitian attitude must be considered a clear sign of a deeply rooted racism. He writes: "Overt racism has etched itself on popular opinion to such a degree that it has gained a level of respectability." In a suggestive manner he continues: "Those Dominicans who speak out in favour of Haitian workers and who acknowledge African descent incite treason in the opinion of others" (pp. 40-41). The conclusion is rapidly drawn. Modern Dominican society is characterized by "a pervasive racial prejudice that devalues the African influence in Dominican society" (p. 182). His interpretation of anti-Haitianism as racism and anti-Africanism distances his analysis from more culturalist or political interpretations that see Dominican anti-Haitianism as only one factor within a complex set of considerations that determine relations between the two nations.

Ernesto Sagás takes a different position, stressing the influence of an authoritarian past and considering Dominican anti-Haitianism as the result of a complex of factors. In line with authors such as Roberto Cassá and Pedro San Miguel, he stresses the ideological manipulation exercised by Dominican governments, especially those headed by Trujillo and Balaguer. He demonstrates convincingly that anti-Haitianism among the Dominican population is an integrated element of a neo-patrimonial political system which is still firmly in place in the country (see also Hartlyn 1998). An authoritarian and clientelist political system uses, as it were, the rejection of its neighboring black population to support its legitimacy and reproduce itself. There is no doubt in Sagás's mind that the anti-Haitian prejudices have led to "an ideological apartheid within the confines of a small island" (p. 18). However, he tends to see that situation as a political construction, rather than as a sign of widespread racial prejudice among the respective populations. He concludes that "Dominican elites have deliberately transformed antihaitianismo into a dominant ideology that cuts across Dominican society, to the point of distorting Dominican history and popular culture" (p. 126).

What do these contrasting interpretations mean for the analysis of racial antagonism on the island? The two books demonstrate that anti-Haitian feelings are widely disseminated in the Dominican Republic. However, they do not say much about the intensity of these perceptions, about their origins or, ultimately, about their possible impact on future developments on the island. Both books show how Dominicans have learned to phrase their sentiments. They do not, in my opinion, succeed in answering the question of how eth-

nic and racial differences within the Dominican Republic and between that country and Haiti influence daily practices of social and political relations. What do Dominican people do with that repertoire of stereotypes and racial images?

There is no doubt that it is notoriously difficult to investigate perceptions of race and of racial and ethnic difference. The gap between what people say they think and what they do in daily practice may be considerable. Contradictions may exist within one individual who hates blacks but still loves his black son-in-law “because he is different.” Political manipulation of prejudices and feelings of frustration often make it almost impossible to know how people really feel. How are we to assess the attitude of a Dominican peasant woman who stresses that the Haitian workers camping out in the tobacco fields are like “animals,” but at night goes there to bring them some hot food for supper? Racial differences play an important role in Dominican social relations, but does that mean that Dominican society is racist? Do prejudices against Haiti and its inhabitants point at structural or political racism in the country? Undoubtedly, anti-Haitianism and racial prejudice are widespread tropes in Dominican society, but we should try to figure out what they mean. To what extent can we speak of a system of apartheid in the country as Sagás suggests? And if it’s not that, what other ways are there to describe the complex political and ethnic relations on the island? If Sagás is right in stating that at this moment “antihaitianismo is a convenient ideology, both for the Dominican elites and for the masses” (p. 126), why is it convenient and what will happen if the convenience disappears? These are the kinds of questions that I feel these studies should have addressed. Definitive answers are difficult to come by as yet, but in the remainder of this review article I wish to present some facts and insights that may point to alternative interpretations. In any case, I would argue that attitudes toward the Haitian presence in the country should be analyzed on different levels, not only as the result of racial prejudices, but also as a result of politics, social and economic inequality, and migration.

In many ways, the Haitian occupation of the island between 1822 and 1844 may be considered the beginning of Dominican anti-Haitianism – not so much because of what really happened, but because of the ideological significance it acquired in the twentieth century. Although historians have analyzed the period 1822-44 as one of moderate economic growth and overall stability, the nationalist Trujillo vision of history viewed the Haitian occupation as the cause of all Dominican problems and the legitimization of ideological anti-Haitianism. This nationalist ideology was complemented at the beginning of the twentieth century by an emphasis on the so-called *invasión pacífica*, a concept used to indicate the steady advance of Haitian peasants into Dominican territory and the consequent deculturalization and denationalization of the border region.

Ultimately, the massacre of some 12,000 Haitians in the Dominican border regions in 1937 was the conclusion of this historical nationalism. The analysis of this horrendous event may provide us with some clues to the nature of Dominican anti-Haitianism. Should we consider it as an unmistakable sign of a virulent anti-Haitian hatred within Dominican society? Or was it the ploy of a ruthless dictator who ordered his military to commit cold-blooded murder in an attempt to execute his Machiavellian nationalism? And even if the latter were the case, is not the fact that the army committed such a crime without protesting a sign of the deep-rooted anti-Haitianism among Dominicans? Howard, after observing that anti-Haitianism has always been virulent in the Dominican Republic, considers the massacre of 1937 as “the most remarkable and disturbing manifestation of this hatred” (p. 29). He then focuses, however, on Trujillista intellectuals like Peña Battle and Balaguer who defended the regime and helped it to formulate its racist ideologies. There is not one sentence on the admittedly very difficult question of the attitude and behavior of the Dominican population during this event.

Sagás stresses how the massacre was principally the doing of Trujillo himself, when he became aware of the fact that his political measures to minimize the Haitian influence in the border regions were a failure. “This repression was Trujillo’s draconian way,” he writes, “of securing his domains and eliminating what he considered a pernicious influence ... in the borderlands” (p. 46). It symbolized the beginning of what Sagás calls a “state-sponsored anti-Haitian ideology” in which Dominican intellectuals provided the regime with an ideological underpinning for its authoritarian policies. Again, Sagás gives us nothing on the perceptions of the Dominican population, but he does add an interesting sentence: “The Trujillo regime implemented state policies in which the spread of antihaitianismo ideology became a major priority, *as part of an orchestrated plan to subjugate and control the Dominican people*” (p. 55, emphasis added). He thus stresses the fact that anti-Haitianism has been used politically to subdue the Dominican population and avoid potential social conflict. I have italicized the last part of this passage because it also suggests that anti-Haitian feelings among the Dominican population were manipulated and may have been less self-evident than authors such as Howard want us to believe.

There is some circumstantial evidence to support this claim. On the basis of interviews in the region, Derby and Turits (1993) concluded that there was no generalized anti-Haitian feeling there at the moment of the massacre. Some Dominicans even tried to hide Haitian friends. That observation concurs with my own historical work, which showed that the populations on both sides of the border were intimately linked by a variety of relations and that anti-Haitianism in the border region was minimal at most. Similar conclusions may be drawn from the recent monumental study of the southern border region by the Swedish scholars Jan Lundius and Mats Lundahl. They studied

the development of the messianistic cult of Olivorio Mateo, which emerged in this region in the beginning of the twentieth century. After some years of peaceful existence in the sparsely populated Dominican border region, the cult was repressed by U.S. marines. It was forced underground during the long Trujillo government, but resurfaced in a small rural village called Palma Sola after Trujillo had been killed. The place became a sanctuary and cult center which attracted some 50,000 people in 1961-62. The Dominican authorities became increasingly uneasy with this uncontrolled religious movement in the sensitive border region, and their feelings were consciously or unconsciously fueled by sensationalist press reports in which promiscuity, communist subversion, voodooism, and anti-Catholicism figured prominently. Under circumstances never completely cleared up, U.S. trained elite troops, the so-called *cascos blancos*, invaded the village in December 1962 and bombarded it with napalm. About a hundred people were killed and some 700 others were imprisoned in this action. The perspective from the border presented in Lundius and Lundahl's *Peasants and Religion* is very insightful. It shows the almost unbridgeable divide between the central government and a region whose survival depended to a large extent on its good relations with Haiti. The book demonstrates how the anti-Haitian ideology was imposed only gradually on the region in the course of the twentieth century. It thereby qualifies interpretations that see the racial, cultural, and political conflicts between the two countries as eternal and unchanging.

The Haitian massacre and the bloody repression of the Palma Sola movement have never been the object of deep soul-searching or national purification in the Dominican Republic. No one was ever brought to justice for the *matanza* of 1937, and even the Haitian authorities preferred – for their own reasons – to bury the issue. The whole matter of silent complicity, inaction, support, or collaboration in the killing of thousands of Haitians will not be solved for a long time. It resembles debates surrounding other traumatic historical events like the genocide in Guatemala, the apartheid regime in South Africa, or the so-called Dirty War of 1976-83 in Argentina. Such a debate would be highly relevant for attempts to reach a profound understanding of the 1937 and 1962 events in the Dominican Republic. However, until we know more about the events, we should refrain from simple deductions as to the common, shared guilt of the Dominican population in general.

Moving closer to our own time, it is important to stress the fact that there has been no virulent or ideologically coherent anti-Haitian movement in the Dominican Republic. There has not been a Ku Klux Klan or an anti-immigrant party, drawing support exclusively from the Haitian issue. In the years after Trujillo's assassination there have been no mass demonstrations or lynchings directed against the Haitians. On the other hand, it could be argued that there was no need for such a movement, because the repressive policies of successive governments in the post-1961 period left no room for one. The

twelve-year government of Joaquín Balaguer closely followed the Trujillista ideology. Haitian immigrant labor was tolerated as long as it was confined to the sugar plantations. People of Haitian descent, often constitutionally Dominican citizens, were denied social and political rights in the Dominican Republic and lived in constant danger of repression or even deportation. Although under the populist or social-democratic governments of the PRD the Haitian issue was pushed to the background, the juridical apparatus and police forces continued to harass Haitian immigrants and their descendants. Recently, the neo-liberal government of Leonel Fernández resorted to deportations of “illegal” Haitian immigrants, referring to similar U.S. and European measures to keep out illegal immigrants and legitimizing these measures as an act of “modern” statesmanship.

So again we have to ask ourselves to what extent these official policies reflected perceptions among the Dominican population. Both Howard and Sagás try to answer that question by way of interviews with “common” Dominicans. In these interviews they attempt to assess the day-to-day perceptions and perspectives with respect to Haiti and Haitian immigrants – what we might call the *habitus* of racial and nationalist classification. There is no doubt that they find a lot of racial and anti-Haitian prejudices among all sectors of Dominican society. It is interesting to note that both of these authors take the presidential elections of 1994 and 1996 as examples of the weight of these prejudices in Dominican politics. During the 1994 elections the old conservative *caudillo* Joaquín Balaguer was pitted against the populist, black-skinned Peña Gómez. Because of Peña Gómez’s color and his (supposed) Haitian ancestry, the racial factor played a central role during the campaign. Balaguer and his campaigners resorted to widespread mudslinging, using negative advertisements, casting doubts on his political integrity, and depicting him as a voodoo-practicing Haitian who believed in satanic rites. Peña Gómez’s enemies also spread rumors that he wanted to unify Haiti and the Dominican Republic and would open the borders for unlimited immigration. With the approach of elections, the campaign intensified with vicious personal attacks in television commercials and anonymous flyers, all coming down to the fact that Peña Gómez’s Haitian ancestry made him a danger for Dominican sovereignty.

The 1996 campaign saw a less explicitly “dirty” campaign, mainly because Balaguer was not an official candidate this time, but the PLD under the direction of Leonel Fernández also tried to play the anti-Haitian card by declaring that many of the registered voters were in fact Haitian nationals. In spite of these accusations Peña Gómez received almost 46 percent of the votes in the May elections. Because he fell short of the required 50 percent, a run-off election between him and Leonel Fernández was scheduled in June. Two weeks before the election date Balaguer declared that his party would “unselfishly” support Leonel Fernández to prevent the Dominican nation

from falling into “not truly Dominican hands.” With the combined votes of the two parties, Leonel Fernández won the second-round elections with 51.25 percent of the votes.

Most observers (and Peña Gómez himself) have taken these events as a sign that racism and anti-Haitianism still determine Dominican social and political relations. Certainly they do play an important role, but just what do these events tell us about popular anti-Haitianism and even racism in the Dominican Republic? The simplest of observations show that almost half of the Dominican voters cast their vote for Peña Gómez in spite of a vicious *ad hominem* slandering campaign by his enemies. Why do so many observers overlook this simple fact? Even Sagás, who so cleverly analyzes the events of 1994 and 1996, concludes that anti-Haitian ideology is still dominant in the Dominican Republic, without mentioning the fact that half of the Dominican population did not have a problem voting for a black candidate who for months was systematically vilified in the media. Even more significantly, at his premature death in May 1998, Peña Gómez was generally heralded as an important and honest politician. His death shocked Dominican society, especially the popular classes. His body was laid in state in the Olympic Stadium where all the important politicians came to pay their respects. His funeral was attended by hundreds of thousands. This may be viewed as a hypocritical homage for a deceased public person, but anyone who has seen and felt the grief caused by his death cannot but concede that he was a genuinely popular politician.

Where does that leave us in assessing popular racism and anti-Haitianism in the Dominican Republic? First of all, it demonstrates that observers are wont to see the racist, anti-Haitian side of Dominican political culture, without paying too much attention to the humanist, tolerant, and even anti-racist tendencies within Dominican society. This kind of observation also holds true for their analysis of political thinking. While intellectuals like Balaguer and Peña Battle are routinely mentioned, there is little room for the analysis of opinions on race and Dominican-Haitian relations by intellectuals such as Pedro Francisco Bonó or Juan Bosch. Even intellectuals with a more complex career like Ramón Marrero Arísty or Ramón Emilio Jiménez, who combined support for the Trujillo regime with an implicit rejection of his racist anti-Haitian policies, are largely ignored. It may be significant that attempts to insert these nuances into the debate, such as the publications by FLACSO under the direction of Rubén Silié (e.g., Silié *et al.* 1998) or the beautiful book by San Miguel (1997), do not figure in Howard's bibliography. It would be wrong to deny the racist, anti-Haitian tendencies in Dominican culture, but it is also unjustified to ignore the equally important democratic, humanist tendencies.

The most important issue concerns the analytical conceptions that we should use to study Dominican political culture. Howard routinely uses the

term "racism" to describe Dominican attitudes and perspectives. In doing so, he tends to create a homogenized image of an entire population rife with racist prejudices. This hardly leaves room for nuances, intermediate categories, anti-racist ideas, and social differences. Sagás is more cautious. He tends to distinguish between elite and popular attitudes, and time and again points to the political manipulation of racial categories. Lundius and Lundahl also discuss the fact that anti-Haitian ideologies were largely the result of political bickering and authoritarian politics in the twentieth century. They consider the emphasis on the racial factor largely as part of the search for a nationalist identity by Dominican politicians. They note the complex interplay between class, race, and nation in Dominican anti-Haitianism, and tend to look for the niches of negotiation, individual and collective contradictions, and the political manipulation of symbols. If there is anything that comes out of reading these books, it is, first, the need to define carefully what is meant by "racism" in the case of Dominican anti-Haitianism, and secondly, to spell out clearly which groups in Dominican society are under discussion. In my opinion, Howard generalizes too easily in casting the whole of Dominican society as utterly racist. Such a perspective tends to cover all kinds of nuances and subtleties that are present in day-to-day relations in Dominican society and which are much too heterogeneous, complex, and at times contradictory to place under the banner of racism.

Everyone who is familiar with Dominican society knows that there is a lot of "race talk" going on and that social and political inequalities are reinforced and sometimes legitimized by racial hierarchies. On the other hand, many subtleties and contradictions in individual and collective behavior will be hidden from academic view if we bring everything together under the concept of "racism." These are difficult and complex issues, and divergent traditions to discuss them may lead to contrasting conclusions about expressions of racism. Moreover, the distinctions are loaded with ideology and value judgments. What in one opinion may be harmless, possibly stupid, ignorance or stereotypical ideas, may in the other be dangerously racist and utterly reproachable opinions. Subtle irony for one author may come close to denial for the other. Who can claim to determine unequivocally where nationalism turns into xenophobia? Racial stereotypes into racism? Analytical distance into indifference? None of this, however, should relieve social scientists of the obligation to keep searching for answers to these difficult questions about racial perceptions, identity, and social hierarchies.

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