

## Intellectuals and Dictators in the Dominican Republic

*Michiel Baud*

- *Nation and Citizen in the Dominican Republic, 1880-1916*, by Teresita Martínez-Vergne. Chapel Hill, NC, University of North Carolina Press, 2005.
- *Los desvaríos de Ti Noel. Ensayos sobre la producción del saber en el Caribe*, by Pedro San Miguel. San Juan, PR, Vertigo, 2004.
- *The Imagined Island. History, Identity, and Utopia in Hispaniola*, by Pedro San Miguel. Translated by Jane Ramírez. Chapel Hill, NC, University of North Carolina Press 2005.
- *Foundations of Despotism. Peasants, the Trujillo Regime, and Modernity in Dominican History*, by Richard Lee Turits. Stanford, CA, Stanford University Press, 2003.

The Dominican Republic had two intellectuals as president during the twentieth century: Juan Bosch and Joaquín Balaguer. Both these men, although ideologically completely different, produced an extensive oeuvre of literary and historical texts and at the same time pursued long political careers. This occurred in the context of the long dictatorship of Rafael Leonidas Trujillo, who controlled the country with an iron hand from 1930 to 1961. The prominence of two politically ambitious intellectuals in a small underdeveloped country with a long authoritarian tradition poses interesting questions as to the relationship between intellectuals and politics.

San Miguel's *The Imagined Island* concerns itself both with the history and the interpretation of history in the Dominican Republic and, to a lesser extent, in Haiti. With great erudition, the author looks into the struggle for identity and political power on the island of Hispaniola shared by Haiti and Santo Domingo. In four lucid essays, San Miguel unravels the historical imagination of this fascinating island. He starts out with two more general essays in which he analyses the historical imagination concerning the Spanish colonial domination of the island and the racial contents of the Dominican identity in the independent Dominican Republic. If anything, these essays confirm how the two parts of the island are linked to each other like Siamese twins; and, on the other hand, how desperately the Dominican elites have tried to affirm the separate identity of their country. The intensity of this double binding is hard to exaggerate and almost impossible to fully understand for outsiders. In the last two essays San Miguel uses Haitian intellectual Jean Price-Mars and Dominican writer-politician Juan Bosch to dig into the complexities of nation building and identity formation in Haiti and the Dominican Republic. He presents Price-Mars as the intellectual voice of Haiti and understands his work as a construction of a Haitian (and one could say 'Black') perspective on the island's identity. In his last essay San Miguel analyses the fictional and historical work by Juan Bosch as an indication of an evolving national modernizing project. This project was evidently coloured by Bosch's experiences in Cuba, that modern and cul-

tured island of the Caribbean. For Bosch, the backwardness of Dominican society, which had led to cultural (or even racial) pessimism among many of the Dominican *letrados*, was the direct result of the absence of a real capitalist development in the country prior to the late twentieth century. This had also led to a weak bourgeoisie that had not been able to hold its own in the face of imperialism and authoritarianism. Later this analysis would become the basis of Bosch's political programme that intended to apply Marxist analysis to the specific circumstances of the country. It has been the tragedy of Juan Bosch's life that after his short, violently aborted presidency in 1963, he never had the opportunity to put his ideas into practice.

*Los desvaríos de Ti Noel*, which was published in Puerto Rico in 2004, touches on many of the same themes and can be seen as a continuation of the discussion started in San Miguel's 1997 book. It is a somewhat uneven collection of essays, book reviews and more general writings. In the long and most interesting essay, 'Visiones históricas del Caribe', San Miguel further pursues his analysis of the relation between intellectuals and national identity, extending it to the historical development of the Spanish Caribbean in general. He sketches the well-known patterns of Spanish Caribbean history with its discussion on the relation between plantations and peasant farming, and shows how this discussion went to the heart of the historical debate in the Caribbean. Influenced by the Indian subaltern studies, but also by the work of his Puerto Rican mentor, Fernando Picó, he is especially interested in the possibilities of the popular classes to influence history. He finishes by suggesting that the present-day migration and globalization has finally placed the subaltern classes on centre stage. San Miguel is at his best when he succeeds in connecting the history of the Spanish Caribbean to broader historiographic issues like nation-building, the social and political position of intellectuals, etc. Of course, there are always issues one can disagree with or debate about. For example, his analysis of Dominican-Haitian relations is still very much informed from a Dominican perspective, and he has not yet succeeded in constructing a completely balanced model of analysis. For example, while he has no problem in presenting the various viewpoints on the side of the Dominican Republic, the only time he presents a Haitian intellectual (Price-Mars), he feels the need to register the objections of a whole range of Dominican intellectuals. A more important issue is that in various instances he points to the oral, popular versions of past and present, and how these are different from those of politicians and intellectuals. But he does not tell us how this popular knowledge and these popular perspectives are constructed, how they relate to more hegemonic national versions, or how they eventually may have a bearing on national political discourse.

San Miguel's books may be compared to a monograph by another Puerto Rican historian, Teresita Martínez-Vergne, which connects to his approach. It focuses on a period that has traditionally been favoured in Dominican historiography, at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, in which the utopia of modernity reigned in full glory. Martínez-Vergne focuses on what may be called 'ideologies of progress', a loose set of ideas which demonstrated the elite's obsession with the idea of 'el progreso'. In the first chapters of her book Martínez-Vergne intends to show how these ideologies of progress combined with a new nationalist fervour that took shape in the urban centres in the south of the country, especially in Santo Domingo, and in San Pedro de Macorís, the then booming sugar town. On the basis

of a wealth of primary sources, she stresses what she calls ‘the bind’ of the Dominican elites. They not only wished modernity, they demanded it, but in this holy project they were faced with a ‘people’ that did not appear to be inclined to ‘rise to the occasion’. Added to this was the influx of migrant labour that was necessary to bring about the desired modernization, but caused its own set of problems of race and national identity. The result was – as everywhere in Latin America – the implementation of Liberal policies that mixed coercion with efforts to paternalistically civilize the poor muddled masses. After a chapter on perceptions of bourgeois femininity that stands somewhat apart from the general thrust of the book, Martínez-Vergne devotes the last chapters to the activities and reactions of these working classes. She argues that what was often considered as resistance to change may better be seen as a struggle for citizenship on the part of the subaltern classes. In combination with access to new material welfare, she suggests that in spite of elite opinions to the contrary, the working men and women of the urban centres actively took part in the search for modernity and national citizenship. Although she presents some interesting material to sustain this view, archival documents do not provide her with many opportunities to present the viewpoints of the subaltern classes.

It is clear that Martínez-Vergne’s book touches on many of the same themes as San Miguel. Both try to understand the construction of intellectual imaginations in the Spanish-speaking Caribbean; both profess the importance of subaltern voices, without effectively being able to present them. The nature of the books, however, is quite different. Martínez-Vergne clearly connects her analysis to archival evidence, where San Miguel (surely on the basis of his earlier archival research) presents more general interpretations. Both perspectives are necessary if we want to understand both history and the production of historical knowledge, but social historians need to find new forms of empirical evidence to better understand the expressions and influence of subaltern voices. At the same time it would be useful to confront their viewpoints not only with fashionable theoretical literature, but also with the results of empirical research in other regions in Latin America or the Caribbean.

The books reviewed here restrict themselves to the realm of knowledge production and do not answer the question regarding its societal consequences. Even Martínez-Vergne, who links her analysis to the social and economic developments of the country, does not provide much insight into how these ideas filtered down into society. The question remains: What were the societal consequences of the words and writings of these intellectuals and how were their ideas perceived by the ‘people’? Were they effective in imposing a hegemonic ideology in the hearts and minds of the Dominican men and women? It is to the great merit of Richard Turits that he tries to approach these questions in his lengthy monograph *Foundations of Despotism*. The book attempts, on the basis of extensive archival and fieldwork research, to unravel what Trujillo and his regime meant for the peasant population in the Dominican Republic. Turits’ initial intention was to write a history of land tenure, but soon this other topic imposed itself. Talking to elderly peasants he discovered that in contrast to the urban middle classes who vilified his regime, many peasants still looked back to this period with good memories. In a long and fascinating volume, Turits tries to understand this phenomenon.

Just as happened to me when I talked to the tobacco peasants in the north, Turits was repeatedly made to understand that the Trujillo regime and its rural policies had been relatively beneficial to the peasantry. While in the tobacco region peasants took advantage of the new control of the intermediate commercial class and the technical assistance the regime provided, in the southern regions where Turits did his research, it was land reform that directly appealed to the peasant producers. But not only that: the state's rhetoric acquired a new tone. Far away from the political preoccupations and musings of the urban intellectuals presented above, the regime addressed the peasants as real Dominican citizens who had the obligation to participate in the sacred state project of nationalist modernity, and at the same time had the right to be treated as such. Turits points out that the rhetoric of peasant laziness and vagrancy was replaced by politics of assistance and the solution of material constraints. Of course, the regime's idealization of the peasant fitted nicely into its conservative nationalist concerns, but for the peasants it meant that their needs were addressed for the first time and that they received structural support from the state.

Turits also shows the downside of this nationalist support of the Dominican peasantry. In Chapter 5 of his book he shifts his attention to the border regions that were so important in the regime's anti-Haitian campaigns. One of Trujillo's most important projects was the so-called 'Dominicanization' of the border region, which was meant to counter the *invasión pacífica* of Haitian squatter peasants. Here Trujillo's support of the Dominican peasantry acquired sinister overtones. He tried to foster large-scale colonization plans meant to attract Dominican peasants to the border region. When these did not work, because the Dominican peasantry was not prepared to move to the dry and hot border regions, Trujillo resorted to the indiscriminate killing of some 12,000 Haitians in the frontier region. Interestingly, Turits sees this episode not so much as the culmination of anti-Haitian ideologies, but as their starting point. It was, in his words, 'a transformative event in the diffusion of anti-Haitian ideology and constructs of a monoethnic nation in the Dominican Republic' (p. 146). Prominent intellectuals who served the dictator converted existing elite prejudices into state ideology and spearheaded its propaganda. In the course of time, anti-Haitianism became the principal source of conservative nationalist ideologies.

The strength of Turits' book is that it draws attention to the contradictory and complex relationship between ideology and practice. The conclusions we can draw from his work are contradictory. On the one hand, there is no doubt that the Trujillo regime managed to legitimate its power among the peasant population. Although the peasants probably did not read much of the intellectual production of the era, their collective memory suggests that they were clearly influenced by it. In any case, they remembered the period as relatively beneficial. This would mean that in the rural areas the Trujillo regime achieved a clear hegemony in the Gramscian sense. On the other hand, Turits also demonstrates that this hegemony was not merely the result of ideological manipulation, but just as much of concrete measures that directly and positively affected the peasantry's existence. It was not so much the intellectuals who brought about this hegemony as the practical men who supported Trujillo's project of agricultural modernity. The limitations of the societal role of the intellectuals are also evident in the period after the end of the

Trujillo regime. To give just one example, the anti-Trujillo sentiment that was injected into the population for more than thirty years at the moment of Turits' fieldwork had not yet been able to erase the fond memories they had about the Trujillo period.

In the shadow of Trujillo's power many intellectuals in the Dominican Republic quenched their thirst for power by their identification with a powerful benefactor. As long as it lasted, they could live under the illusion of their crucial role in the development and modernization of society. It is the irony of history that in the end neither Trujillo nor the mostly illiterate peasant population paid the least bit of attention to the intellectuals' efforts or the ideas they formulated.

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