

Hispaniola, two hundred years on

Haiti's President Aristide is seeking funds for a splendid celebration in 2004, the bicentennial of the first black revolution. Meanwhile, in the Haitian countryside, more than 4 million descendants of slaves – smallholders, sharecroppers and agricultural workers – are facing almost insurmountable obstacles: archaic farming practices, the repression of human and trade union rights and the absence of the State. The choice before them? The shanty towns or the Dominican Republic.

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Toblero, a few minutes away from the beach resort of Boca Chica and its “all-inclusive” tourism. Ramon Ramirez’s red cap, marked “BALAGUER”,¹ contrasts nicely with the green backdrop of the sugar fields. Ramon lives in a *bateye*, a wretched encampment inhabited by the *braceros*, Haitian cane-cutters, together with their families. According to some sources, between 500,000 and 1 million Haitians like Ramon live in the Dominican Republic. They work mainly in agriculture, but also in other sectors like construction and the free trade zones. Most of them are undocumented and are regarded as illegal immigrants. Ramon is an exception. His Dominican identity card states that he was born there in 1941. And he remembers that his parents came from Jacmel in Haiti. His memory fails him when he is asked why he has a Spanish-sounding name, but his parents probably decided to make his life a little less difficult than theirs by Hispanizing his name.

Long history of exploitation

Exploitation of Haitian labour in the Dominican Republic began with the development of the sugar industry during the First World War, when the collapse of sugar beet production in Europe made it possible for the Dominican Republic to become

a major sugar producer. The United States, which occupied the country from 1916 to 1924, organized the recruitment of Haitian workers. When the Americans pulled out, this immigration, legal or not, continued. There were some bloody episodes, such as in 1937 when the troops of General Rafael Trujillo, who had seized power seven years before, massacred 20,000 Haitian migrants at the frontier within the space of a few days. This did not prevent the Haitian dictator Jean-Claude Duvalier from reaching agreement with him, in the 1950s, on formal structures for seasonal hiring. Despots do not hold the odd massacre against each other when there are fat profits to be made on the backs of the *braceros*. Trujillo’s former right-hand man, Joaquim Balaguer, and several other leaders were to take the same line: exploitation, massive expulsions and anti-Haitian propaganda.²

In his *bateye* at Toblero, Ramon Ramirez does not really follow all the subtleties of politics, but the people who gave him the cap said he had to support the “reds”.³ So yes, next year he will no doubt vote for the party of the former conservative caudillo. For the rest of his community, politics remains an even darker mystery. They have never voted in their lives, they do not have any papers, and they are irregular, even if some of them were born in the Dominican Republic, like Ramon. But although the country’s Constitution grants nationality

to those born on its territory, this principle is never respected in practice – unless their parents are legal migrants, which is very rarely the case.

So their main concern is to get from one day to the next. “We don’t earn enough to eat properly, take care of ourselves or buy clothes”, explains Joseph, a *bracero*. His job is to load the cane on to the trucks. He receives 50 pesos per skip filled. That comes to about 600 to 700 pesos every two weeks. But sometimes the truck does not turn up. Those days, he earns nothing. What is more, the *zafra*, the sugar cane harvest, lasts for only six months. The rest of the year, Joseph makes a little bit of money tending the fields.

Joseph lives with Sabine. They have a ten-year-old daughter, but both of them also have bigger children back in Haiti. Joseph no longer gets any news of his children there. Sabine tries to keep in touch with her three sons. In December 2002, she set off to see them. An opportunity arose to cross the frontier. The people smuggler asked her for 1,000 pesos and she had to pay the transport costs too. Once she returned, she tried in vain to claim the wages that her employers owed her as a domestic servant.

At the encampment, an atmosphere of desolation reigns, unbroken even by the cries of the children playing in an old car wreck. They do have a school, built last year thanks to a grant from the Dominican State, but the teacher has stayed away for several weeks now. He was not paid his salary. In the *bateye* of Toblero, nobody would dream of protesting. “Nobody helps us”, says Sabine resignedly. “We don’t have papers. In Toblero, it’s not like in Santo Domingo. Here, the police usually let the Haitians alone. But we know that they could evict us at any minute.”

Dajabon, a frontier town (Dominican Republic). On Mondays and Fridays, Dajabon turns into a real beehive. The frontier is opened. Thousands of Haitians come in to sell *pèpè* (used clothes) and contraband goods that have ended up in Haiti. In return, they buy Dominican agricultural produce which they can no longer

find in sufficient quantities in their own country. The Dominican Republic continues to rely on its agriculture, thanks in particular to the exploitation of migrant labour. But in Haiti, the agricultural sector – although it continues to involve more than half of the active population – now represents just 22 per cent of GDP. It is heart-rending to see hundreds of Haitian men and women heading back and forth, their faces dripping with sweat, across the frontier post that straddles the Rio Massacre, some with bundles of old rags on their heads, the others struggling with overloaded barrows full of agricultural produce. The presence of soldiers, *cobradores* (watchmen) and customs officers gives an appearance of legality, but according to the few non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that have decided to operate on the border, this market is a no-go area for due process. “The Haitian buyers and sellers who frequent these markets are forced to pay a whole range of taxes that are often levied by officials or the military, without any legal basis. In Dajabon market, for instance, a seller may be obliged to pay customs duties several times over on the same goods. Each year, this market is auctioned off to an operator who then collects the rentals for space from the stallholders. To do this, he hires groups of people who impose whatever charges they wish. If anyone refuses to pay, then merchandise, often worth more than the sum demanded, is simply seized.”⁴

Repression

While Dajabon market is a great source of disputes and human rights violations, they also happen every day right along the frontier. The repatriation of Haitians, or the refusal of re-entry after they have spent a few days in Haiti, is well-documented by the NGOs that are active at the border. Down the years, they have noticed that waves of such incidents often coincide with particular events: a political crisis and threatened coup in Haiti, an electoral campaign and consequent ratcheting up of xenophobia

in the Dominican Republic, renewal of the *bracero* workforce before the *zafra*, so as to have younger, more docile labour, etc. These NGOs note that, despite a protocol signed between the two countries in 1999, convoys unload their human cargoes after the border has closed, at undesignated crossings. Night is also the preferred time for most clandestine crossings in the opposite direction. For the migrants, real risks are involved due to the existence of all kinds of trafficking (arms, drugs, etc.) and a reinforced and sometimes trigger-happy Dominican military presence. Murders are frequent, police enquiries and court cases much less so.

“Recently”, explains Xavier, an activist in the NGO *Solidaridad fronteriza*, “a Haitian woman was murdered just outside Dajabon on account of a papaw fruit. A Dominican farmer was certain that he had caught a papaw thief, and he wanted to take his revenge by making him several whole papaws, husk and all. The man’s mother intervened, and the farmer took out his gun and shot her in the back. When the local radio reported what had happened, several listeners expressed their indignation on air. Not because of the murder. No, they were outraged that anyone would dare to arrest an honest Dominican peasant.”

At Ouanaminthe, on the Haitian side, the contrast is striking. Dust and an all-embracing misery – the socio-economic indicators that people consult to get an idea of the state of development of a country are suddenly transformed into tangible reality. The Dominican Republic and Haiti are both classed as “developing countries”, but the former has the strongest economic growth in the Americas while the latter is the poorest nation in the hemisphere. On the edge of the little town, in Nan Cacao and Pitobert, two places on the Maribahoux plain, Haitian policemen are standing guard while heavy equipment digs up the ground. Several days ago, construction work began there for a free trade zone, sparking anger among the inhabitants

“This is supposed to be an agricultural area”, explains Gaston Etienne, an agron-

omist from Ouanaminthe and a member of the Pitobert Defence Committee. “In fact, it’s one of the country’s last remaining zones with high agricultural potential. With a little upgrading, it could make the whole north-east region self-sufficient in rice, beans and maize. The water-table is six feet below. We have constantly demanded State aid for the peasants, and a good irrigation system with technical support, so as to increase national production.”

Not only did the aid never arrive, but for the last two years, the Haitian authorities have not replied to requests from various human rights and environmental NGOs for information and concertation on this matter. It was in 2001 that trade unionists from the two countries alerted the local population to the intention of a Dominican industrial group, active in the textile sector, to move into Maribahoux. Its aim was to gain new scope for exports to the United States, as the limits of the Dominican Republic’s quotas had been reached. The free trade zone project materialized in April 2002, when President Aristide came to lay the foundation stone. He was accompanied by his opposite number, the Dominican Republic’s President Rafael Hipolito Mejia, and he declared that the project was “the first child of the Haitian-Dominican union”. Indeed, the free zone is just one stage of an enormous programme of cross-border integration, baptized the “Hispaniola Fund”, which would be mainly financed out of the convertible part of the two countries’ bilateral debt to the United States. This “anti-poverty” plan provides for the construction of free trade zones, roads, irrigation basins and dams, and for reforestation activities, in a frontier corridor common to both countries.

But on 18 March 2003, on the fertile plain of Maribahoux, 54 powerless peasants witnessed the destruction of their houses and crops. “Nobody was given any warning”, Gaston Etienne insists. “In most cases, these are smallholdings of no more than a *carreau* – that’s 1.29 hectares. Those who have a deed of title may be able to

claim compensation, but the others?" The peasants sought an injunction. But a few days later, the judge issued the following declaration: "By virtue of an order of the Government commissioner attached to the court of first instance of Fort-Liberté, obliging me to refrain from setting foot in this place until further notice, this request cannot be granted for the time being".

The unions mobilize

Leogane, up in the mountains, two hours' drive from Port-au-Prince. About 30 delegates of the smallholders' organization *Rassemblement des petits planteurs* (RASPA) are meeting in a community centre made of blocks without mortar, bits of wood, plastic and some sheet-iron. Depending on the time and the day, it is used for reading and writing lessons, for preaching or for union meetings, like the one today to mark the visit of Fritz Charles and Carlo Napoléon, respectively the General Secretary and the Treasurer of the Haitian Trade Union Coordination (*Coordination syndicale haïtienne*). They have come to hear the peasants' grievances and to try to mobilize them for future campaigns to press their demands.

Although it was supposed to spare those most in need, the freezing of a large proportion of international aid, decreed after the mangled elections in the year 2000, is hitting Leogane hard. The peasants are making ruinous purchases of seed and fertilizers, because they know in advance that they risk heavy losses. The drought destroys the harvests and when the rains do come, erosion carries the crops away. Since the embargo, the reforestation programme has stopped. In the mountains, the peasants have gone back to felling the little bit of tree cover that had so far been spared. Children who used to go to school no longer do so. They suffer from malnutrition and illnesses linked to untreated water. The exodus is starting again. Towards the shanty towns or the Dominican Republic.

The meeting with the trade unionists fortifies the peasants, and they say they

are ready to mobilize for a march on Port-au-Prince, despite fears of reprisals. Certainly, the *chefs de section*, the Duvalierist local potentates whose word was law even in the remotest country areas, have disappeared. But the insecurity linked to the political crisis remains. Leading local officials are all from the Fanmi Lavalas, President Aristide's party. Exactions against members of peasants' organizations, committed with the consent or even the participation of these officials, have multiplied since 2000. On the radio, people heard that on 21 March 2003, near Hinche on the Central Plateau, a march by the Papaw Peasants' Movement was brutally halted by armed partisans of President Aristide. Police forces present at the scene did not intervene. But the most dramatic case is the Guacimal dossier – from the name of a company which runs orange and lemon plantations and exports essential oils from bitter oranges, marketed for use in liqueurs such as Cointreau or Grand Marnier.

On 27 May 2002, in Saint-Raphaël, a protest by the trade union *Syndicat des ouvriers de Guacimal Saint-Raphaël* (SOGS), supported by a group of trade unionists from *Batay Ouvriye* (Workers' Struggle) was put down by men armed with machetes and guns, led by town councillors. They killed two peasants, injured several others and burned down some houses. When the police decided to intervene, they arrested 11 people, including two journalists and seven trade unionists from *Batay Ouvriye*, and imprisoned them in Port-au-Prince. Despite a report by the National Coalition for Haitian Rights (NCHR), highly critical of the local councillors, and despite a high-profile international campaign, the authorities only freed the detainees very gradually, one by one. The last two detained trade unionists were released on 2 December 2002.

In Saint-Raphaël, the agricultural workers wanted to reaffirm their right to use citrus fields, between seasons, to grow their own food, in line with an agreement reached when the land was bought in 1958 by the Novella family, which runs Guaci-

mal. In 2000, the workers founded a trade union, with the assistance of *Batay Ouvriye*. Despite the hostility shown by Guacimal, and its reluctance to negotiate with the SOGS, some wage demands were met. Then, in May 2002, the workers' wish to end the sharecropping system, arbitrarily organized by the guards and supervisors to their own advantage, led to the dramatic clash.

The repression of peasants' organizations, and the abandonment of the countryside by the elites who possess political and economic power, are a constant of Haitian history right up to the present day.⁵ Many writers therefore immerse themselves in the "specificity of Haiti" in order to make the link between the past and the present. For example, the author André Corten, like others before him, thinks that the centuries-old resistance of the peasants against the big traders and coffee exporters has brought the peasantry to a suicidal state. He points to the practice of *marronnage*, "which refers to the situation of slaves who escaped from the plantations to the colony's inaccessible wooded knolls". After independence, this became a general survival reflex.⁶ This dominant cultural trait within Haitian society would in particular explain the very high proportion of rural dwellers (about 65 per cent of the population, as against an average of 25 per cent for the other Latin American countries), but also the people's distrust of the State, which historically has been very repressive and has been completely absent from the provision of public services.

Considering the countryside as one of the sites of bloody conflicts during Haiti's long democratic transition, the sociologist Laënnec Hurbon notes that "the demands of the rural sector have been the least listened to". He also explains that "the many charges levied on agricultural production, by the big landowners, the urban traders, the usurers and the State, without giving anything in return (roads, schools, hospital care or agricultural credit), make the peasantry the most underprivileged section of national society".⁷

Nothing has really changed in the Haitian countryside since the nineteenth century. In many cases, sharecropping – which consists of leasing out land (often lower-quality) in return for 30 to 50 per cent of the harvest – continues to dictate the balance of power. Aware that it is difficult to know just how much somebody has harvested, landowners often turn to their own advantage the negotiations on the share due. Whether sharecroppers, smallholders or agricultural workers (categories that in any case often overlap), Haitian peasants generally suffer the same evils. Apart from what the experts discreetly call "structural problems", the peasants have to deal with economic fluctuations which, in reality, are often related to the fundamental handicaps of the rural areas. Nobody can do anything about a lack of rain, but the same cannot be said of landslides, scorched crops and land that has become infertile due to desperate exploitation of the soil, which in turn is linked to inaction by the State. The same goes for the ravages of insects, which do not seem to worry anyone except the peasants themselves; for the lack of outlets for agricultural produce facing competition from imports or contraband; or for the fall in the coffee price, which reveals the weaknesses of the authorities who organize a sector that is, after all, vital to tens of thousands of families. If nothing has really changed in the basic problems of the countryside, it may nonetheless be noted that the peasants have, thanks to their organizations, developed an ever keener awareness of the constraints posed by globalization, but also of the structural changes that a modern State, even without any great means, could achieve.

Notes

¹ Named after President Joaquin Balaguer, who ruled the Dominican Republic with an iron fist from 1966 to 1996, after succeeding General Rafael Trujillo. Joaquin Balaguer died in July 2002.

² In a document from an American NGO, there is the following description of life in the *bateyes*: Once they arrive in the sugar farms run by the Dominican

State, the workers are subject to strict rules. They are not allowed to leave the *bateyes* – the sugar-cane plantation communities where they live – and they are under constant armed surveillance. Often, the Haitians are not paid in money, but in vouchers that can be exchanged only in the company's stores, which deduct 20 per cent of the face value. When the Haitians are paid in money, they generally receive less than the minimum wage required for field workers. Moreover, payment is based on the weight of cane cut, as indicated by scales that have been rigged to the workers' disadvantage. (Translated from the French.)

³ Curiously enough, in the Dominican Republic, red is the conservatives' colour.

⁴ Evaluation of the human rights situation on the Haitian-Dominican border in 2002 by the *Groupe d'appui aux réfugiés et aux apatrides* (GARR).

⁵ Without going too far back, mention should be made of the massacre, by cold steel, of 200 peasants in Jean-Rabel, in the north of the country, in 1987.

⁶ Corten, A.: *Misère, religion et politique en Haïti*, (Paris, Karthala, collection Hommes et Sociétés, 2001).

⁷ Hurbon, L.: *Pour une sociologie d'Haïti au XX^e siècle, la démocratie introuvable*, (Paris, Karthala, 2001).
