

DOMINICAN REPUBLIC - Discrimination, Oppression, and Identity in Dominican Society

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I have been meaning to write an article about identity and oppression for a while, because I think that by exploring these concepts we can identify some aspects of our political system that maintain the public divided, uneducated, and complacent. When the word “discrimination” is mentioned in the DR, most people REACT by shifting the issue to anti-Haitian movements. Let me start by saying, even if Haitian immigration were not vilify as THE MAJOR problem in the DR, or even if we didn’t have any Haitians in the at all, we would still suffer from discrimination and oppression along racial, gender, and sexual lines, among others.

So let me preempt all the comments shifting my words to Anti-Dominicanism or pro-Haitianism or UN-Collaborator, by saying that my thoughts and comments are aimed to highlight an oppressively uneven distribution of resources, the lack of incorporation of the public in public decisionmaking processes, and some mechanisms used to hide these flaws in our political system and manufacture an oppressive identity. I promise I’ll try to keep the theory to a minimum, but will respond with more info if questions are posted.

With that said, let me start.

One of the principal functions of “Culture” is that it characterizes bodies, music, art, accents, jobs, sexuality, et cetera, into a value-laden hierarchical continuum that tells us what is good from what is bad; what is ugly from what is sublime; what is licit from what is not. Different mechanisms are used to create and support these hierarchies – the media, music, religion, myths, schools, history... e.g. why are actors and models used in the advertisement in the DR mostly, if not altogether, white? Why do we consider the Spanish or Argentine accent more educated? To cut to the chase, why do we admire the “European” and slander the non-white? In the Centro Leon in Santiago, there is a wonderful exhibition on Dominican ancestry. It is divided into two post-Taino halves: first, one sees things we derived from the Spaniards. These artifacts are brightly lit and highly celebrated. The second half of the exhibition is walled-off, and the wall has a few holes people can look through and see an extensive collection of artifacts, foods, and customs we inherited from our African ancestors. The exhibition is clear in its message: Dominican society celebrates the “European” and hides the “African”. This is also evident from our language – “improving the race”; “good hair” versus “bad hair”; and so on.

People’s identities are shaped by interaction with these cultural hierarchies. People can suffer damage when the society around them mirrors back to them a confining or demeaning picture of themselves. People internalize “recognized images” which present an obstacle to the advancement of minority groups and provide an unfair advantage to those who are fortunate to be born, by mistake, into the dominant group. This self-depreciation, lack of self-respect, low self-esteem, this negative recognition is a form of oppression. It leads, in the words of Charles Taylor, to a “crippling self-hatred.”

In *Justice and the Politics of Difference*, Marion Iris Young (1990) provides an interesting definition of “Oppression.” She argues, in chapter 2, that oppression has five faces: “Exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, cultural imperialism, and violence.” For brevity’s sake, I’ll briefly touch on each and leave it up to the readers to determine if any of these mechanisms are present in the Dominican culture.

Exploitation is the expropriation of surplus value by one group by another. In democracies it is structurally enacted and supported by “social rules about what work is, who does what for whom, how

work is compensated, and the social process by which the results of work are appropriated operate to enact relations of power and inequality. These relations are produced and reproduced through a systematic process in which the energies of the have-nots are continuously expended to maintain and augment the power, status, and wealth of the Haves.”

Marginalization occurs when people are systematically excluded, either willfully or through some weeding “barriers”, from the labor market. Marginalized people are subject to severe deprivation and even extermination. Additionally, because of their dependant position, they are excluded from or barely included in public decision making process and are subject to intrusive rules and oversight.

Powerlessness includes “inhibition in the development of one’s capacities, lack of decisionmaking power in one’s working life, and exposure to disrespectful treatment because of the status one occupies.” A good example is the freedom enjoyed by professional workers, while “blue-collar” workers are subject to all kinds of oversight mechanisms.

Cultural imperialism means that the “dominant group” in a society renders their meaning, views, values, and overall experience as the “natural” or “legitimate,” while rendering all other groups invisible and their experience unnatural, foreign, illicit, or even evil. “Cultural imperialism involves the universalization of a dominant group’s experience and culture, and its establishment as the norm” These groups may dominate or have primary access to the means of communication and portray their views as dominant through these channels. “Since only the dominant group’s cultural expressions receive wide dissemination, their cultural expressions becomes the normal, or the universal.” The dominant group reinforces its position by labeling other cultures as “the other”, inferior, uncultured, ordinary, and deviant. The culturally dominated are rendered invisible and at the same time labeled inferior. Stereotypes of dominated groups are so prevalent that they are uncontested, internalized, and portray members of oppressed groups as non-individuals. The only legitimate individuals are those who belong to the dominant group. “This, then, is the injustice of cultural imperialism: that the oppressed group’s own experience and interpretation of social life finds little expression that touches the dominant culture, while that same culture imposes on the oppressed group its experience and interpretation of social life.”

Violence is a social practice, and approaches legitimacy, when it is tolerated. Light punishment of violence toward women, homosexuals, kids, immigrants, minorities, the poor, mentally-ill, and other oppressed groups is a form of sanctioned oppression.

The State is not, in and of itself, the sole perpetrator of these oppressive practices, but, as I explained a few weeks ago, institutions are very powerful in shaping our culture. The state can endeavor to create institutions to reach out to traditionally marginalized population and help “level the playing field.” In South Africa and the

U.S., for example, there are laws that require banks to invest in traditionally marginalized communities. That is, the State has recognized that banks will not invest in poor communities, and that they need to be compelled to do so. These policies have generated jobs in urban and rural areas and have helped traditionally depressed communities become more economically active.

But actually, the uneven distribution of resources should only be the beginning of our analysis. We should question the processes which led to such skewed distribution and work to correct them. To that end, I propose that it is the lack of inclusiveness of the public in public-decisionmaking processes that has led to our government adopting such regressive programs that continuously transfer resources to the rich and maintain the middle and poor classes in a desperate situation.

Recognizing differences among groups in the DR is a step that may lead to increased participation and may help address the huge resource inequalities present in the DR. The lack of recognition of difference – the portrayal that there is no difference among Dominicans – masks the huge exclusion of minorities, women, homosexual, and other oppressed groups from positions of power. The rhetoric of “One Dominican identity” is a mechanism of oppression and exclusion, not unity.

This article is a call to recognize that discrimination and oppression exists in the DR, and that it includes and is not limited to Haitian immigrants. It is a call to be aware of the oppressiveness of the imposition of only one Dominican culture. The reality is that the DR is a multi-class, multi-ethnic, multi-racial, multi-religious, multi-sexual, multi-lingual society. We are more than just the white models used in advertisements. We are more than just baseball players.

We are more than cheap labor. We are strong women, men, gays, black, white, Asian and everything in between. By masking these differences, we mask who we are, oppress ourselves, and support the same mechanisms that we criticize which demobilize people from political participation.

In addition, this article is a challenge to recognize that we may be oppressing others through our actions, words, or inaction. People like to claim that they are oppressed, but seldom do they like to recognize that they may also be oppressing others sexually, racially, or religiously. We must strive to truly recognize and appreciate the differences between people and reject the stereotypes conveyed by the dominant groups.

Misrecognition is a form of oppression, and a “colorblind” policies and rhetoric are political mechanisms to mask inequality and placate/demobilize the population from demanding change.