

Opinion

DOMINICAN REPUBLIC - Santo Domingo: not Paris, not even La Vega!

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Wednesday 6 February 2008, posted by [Edward D. Gonzalez-Acosta](#)

I just got back from a trip to Paris, where I spent a week in meetings about a research project I am conducting on Migration and Political Transnationalism. But mostly, the trip was an excuse to tour around this majestic city. I walked and enjoyed all the public amenities that Paris and cities like it have to offer. Despite this not being my first time in Paris, I found myself amazed at the importance politicians give to the public sphere.

The Parisian and French governments have invested a considerable amount of resources in the public sphere. What do I mean by the public sphere? I mean things open and available to the public: parks, public transportation, public bicycles, bookstores open to the public, theaters not behind gates, and a feeling of public safety and infrastructure; things Santo Domingo has yet to achieve.

For example, besides the Colonial Zone in Santo Domingo and the Miradores parks, where else are there open parks where our kids can play or couples go for a walk? Or people meet to play chess or dominoes? Or bookstores where one can come across some volume of social commentary? Santo Domingo has a decaying public sphere, and the little public sphere that exists is oriented to tourists.

While enjoying Paris, it hit me. Why is Santo Domingo not as pleasant as Paris? Is it because we are a poor country? Well, Buenos Aires, Mexico City, Havana, and our own La Vega- a mid-size city in the northern part of the Dominican Republic which has beautiful parks and cafes - all have a pleasant public sphere - not at the level of Paris or New York, but that's expected. The lack of national wealth may be a factor, but not a prohibitive factor to investing in the public sphere. What could it be?

I propose that it is the lack of political leadership in our society and our focus on the private life that has prevented investment in the public sphere. People are taught to focus too much on the "self" and not on "the public" and politicians are all too eager to avoid any issue that brings up the poor state of our public sphere in Santo Domingo. Again, the Colonial Zone is an exception. Why? Because resources have been mobilized to invest in maintaining the public sphere of this zone.

Yes, foreign monies help maintain the Colonial Zone, but before the foreign money could come to help the Colonial Zone, the government had to seek such help. Why not mobilize resources to invest in Herrera or Los Mina?

The gargantuan resources dedicated to the Metro can be seen as a significant investment in the public sphere, but the poor transparency and lack of accountability of the process raises many questions, such as whether this investment is for the public, or for the continued accumulation of resources among elites.

Another reason why our public sphere is in such state of disarray is that our society has been oriented to satisfy external needs and the needs of the elites since 1492. There is no political movement aiming to create a middle class or an internal market. We focus on supplying cheap exports and labor to developed countries, and providing foreign tourists with the best of the best of our natural resources. No movement exists to invest in developing internal markets and the purchasing power of a middle class. No efforts exist to redistribute the wealth hoarded by a few families since the conquest. No effort exists to stop the vicious

circle that maintains most of the public in misery and distracted from the corruption of the state.

We need political leaders who will step away from the distribution of resources to selected groups/individuals and start investing in the public sphere. For better or worse, we have Amable giving out chickens to the poor, and we have Leonel giving out billions to a small number of rich people. Our candidates and political leaders will have to move away from politics as usual (political clientelism) and propose a political platform that outlines a list of policy issues, among which, I hope will be effective investment in the public sphere - schools, parks, roads, public transport, cultural venues available to the public, etc. Investing in the public sphere will help develop strong internal markets and a powerful middle class.

This is a chicken and egg problem - what comes first, political leaders who push ideas like these through, or a social movement that creates leaders that that will replace the ineffective ones we have?

This is when civil society organizations - like Participacion Ciudadana, the Church, students organizations, labor unions, and Human Rights NGOs - should step up and demand political leaders who will provide a platform that centers on the public sphere, and not on personal or party interests. If the current political leaders are unable to do so, then civil society should step up and lead the creation of new social movements that will help change our society.

Until the public wakes up, the political parties, which benefit from the public's docile participation, will continue with politics as usual, and Santo Domingo will never become La Vega, let alone Paris.