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and society  
in the**

# DOMINICAN REPUBLIC

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**emelio betances**

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State and Society  
in the Dominican Republic



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# State and Society in the Dominican Republic

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*Emelio Betances*

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*In appreciation of my parents, José Manuel Betances and  
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Leticia Aldana de Betances, and my daughter,  
Gabrielle Betances Aldana*



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# Foreword

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Hobart A. Spalding

*State and Society in the Dominican Republic* represents a milestone in Dominican studies. In the pages that follow, Professor Emelio Betances of Gettysburg College seeks to explain the origins of the modern Dominican Republic by looking at social, political, and economic developments from independence in 1844 to the present. This effort, a particularly potent blend of theory and solid archival research, seeks to explain the formation of the Dominican state by looking at its nineteenth-century roots and to link that formation to processes that subsequently unfolded and that influence the current situation.

Betances's emphasis upon the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries underscores his argument that the key events in the formation of the modern Dominican state preceded the first U.S. military occupation, which took place from 1916 to 1924. The study clearly links ongoing phenomena such as political instability, caudillismo, and dependency to a historical process that began shortly after independence and that deepened markedly with the growth of the sugar complex and foreign intervention after 1880. By the time of the U.S. intervention, socioeconomic formations already existed that conditioned the course of events and the ultimate outcome of the occupation.

The text makes a strong case for looking at Dominican development not just in terms of the intromission of outside forces but in terms of the dialectic between those forces and internal ones. Betances thus reasons that the ascension of Rafael Trujillo to power after 1930 should not be seen as an imposition by the United States or even as a "logical" or inevitable conclusion to the eight-year U.S. rule but rather as a result of the dynamics between imperial power and local economic, social, and political configurations. He concludes that internal factors rank alongside (if not over) external influences in determining final outcomes to particular historical processes. He reminds the reader that despite enormous discrepancies in the relative power between the United States and the Dominican Republic at all times, the former could not

just impose its will upon the latter. This important point is often lost on those studying small states in the periphery.

Betances's arguments challenge much of the conventional wisdom of Dominican scholarship. He suggests, for example, that the dictatorship of Ulises Heureaux (1886–1899) and the regime of Ramón Cáceres (1906–1911) formed two distinct attempts to forge a modern national state. The fact that these attempts failed should not obscure the reality that they laid a groundwork and strengthened trends that the U.S. military government continued during 1916 to 1924. In reality, all three periods (those of Heureaux, Cáceres, and the U.S. intervention) make up the formative stage of the modern Dominican state. As such they provide, together, the historical and structural framework for the emergence of the thirty-year dictatorship of Rafael L. Trujillo (1930–1961).

As a historical sociological study, the book focuses upon the transformation of dominant class forces and their relationship to the origins and consolidation of the state. It further seeks to explain the impact of the modern dictatorial regimes—those of Trujillo and of Joaquín Balaguer (1966–1978)—on the process of state formation from 1978 to 1993. In doing so, Betances clearly links the Dominican past to the Republic's present. He argues, for example, that the regimes of Heureaux and Trujillo, as well as Balaguer's tenure in office, all illustrate how public resources have been used as a basis for the creation of economic (and therefore social and political) elites.

Solid scholarly work on the Republic has only very recently blossomed forth into a full-fledged international research field. Prior to the 1960s most people who studied the nation either did so for purely political reasons (i.e., to push their own particular point of view and often their own personal careers) or were traditional scholars who could afford the leisure of looking at the past. Only in the last dozen or so years has a whole new generation of younger researchers, many of them trained in Europe or the United States, systematically begun to investigate the important topics concerning the formation of Dominican society past and present. Betances belongs to this new group of scholars. His work thus complements that of people such as Frank Báez Evertsz or Roberto Cassá who have published on diverse themes, including social formations and the state, from both historical and contemporary perspectives. Betances also questions or seeks to modify positions put forward in the work of Ramonina Brea, José Oviedo, and Pedro Catrain, all of whom have written on aspects of state formation in the Dominican Republic.

In addition to being one of the most comprehensive studies about the development of Dominican state and society after 1880 and on the links between earlier social formations and the current situation, this study makes several other important contributions. It rests upon seldom-used sources, such as U.S. State Department records and materials in Dominican archives, most notably around the thorny issue of United States–Dominican relations, par-

ticularly in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The reader will find extensive notes and a substantial bibliography. This grounding in empirical data successfully complements the introductory material that discusses the theoretical literature on the state in general as well as relevant Dominican historiography.

This book, however, represents more than just a monograph by a leading younger scholar. In an important way, by examining the origins of the Dominican state and class formations, it follows an established tradition within Dominican letters represented, for example, by the writings of Juan Bosch (*Composición Social Dominicana*) or of Juan I. Jiménez-Grullón (*Sociología Política Dominicana*). The major difference between the work of these precursors and that of Betances lies in the fact that instead of sociological speculation or intuition (often insightful and, in many cases, subsequently found to be largely accurate), his work is rooted in specific theory and grounded by solid scholarly investigation.

As a study of the evolution of a weak and semicolonial state, this book has important implications not only for the Dominican Republic but also for the entire Caribbean. It raises important questions concerning the imposition of other strong men under seemingly similar situations, such as that in Nicaragua, where the Somoza dynasty immediately followed U.S. occupation. In the same vein, how does François “Papa Doc” Duvalier’s reign connect with the U.S. occupation of Haiti, ended in 1934? Must the rise of Fulgencio Batista to power in Cuba during the 1930s be viewed purely as a creation of President Franklin Roosevelt’s special envoy Sumner Welles and U.S. foreign policy? The study obviously calls for a serious reevaluation of the role of local and foreign forces in the historical process in the whole circum-Caribbean basin. It also suggests other questions. How did state formation in the area impact the emergence of local dominant elites in each case? And does a Caribbean typology of state and elite formation exist? Betances’s work indicates that the answer may be yes.

This book, moreover, is not just an esoteric study of an abstract entity called “the state.” The book successfully links past and present to make it one of the few historical interpretations of independent Santo Domingo. The last two chapters examine the era of Rafael Trujillo and the period since his assassination. They build upon the previous material to show how earlier formations strongly influenced later developments. Further, they look at the links between Trujillo and current strongman Dr. Joaquín Balaguer. As a historical sociologist, Professor Betances traces continuities in social formations, explicitly the persistence of clientelism and caudillism from their mid-nineteenth-century roots to present. At the same time, he skillfully analyzes the role of foreign influence, which has persistently impacted the course of Dominican history from the origins of the first Republic in 1844 right up to the present.

As an interpretive work covering the whole sweep of Dominican development, the book stands out as one of the few of its kind. It clearly makes a contribution to nineteenth- and twentieth-century Dominican studies. It also sheds light on the question of the development of the state in the Caribbean and Latin America.

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*Emelio Betances*