

Power and Politics:
A History of Electricity and the State in the Dominican Republic

University of Michigan, Ann Arbor
Undergraduate Thesis in Anthropology
By
Justin Bean

Fernando Coronil, advisor
April 2007

Chapter I—Introduction to the Politics of Electricity in the Dominican Republic

This paper is a historical-anthropological analysis of electricity in the Dominican Republic. That electricity is of every day value to people across the world is not a controversial statement; that electricity, viewed from within a specific geographic, political, or cultural perspective, has its own historical trajectory is less apparent. The most prevalent terms by which electricity offers an analytical locus draw on issues pertaining to economics, infrastructure, and development. However there is, as I argue here, more to electricity than such foci would have us believe. If we agree that electricity has a value to consumers, an anthropological query would invite us to look at how this value operates within certain relationships: between consumers and generators, between generators and the state, between consumers and the state. For instance, for consumers in the Dominican Republic reliant on the national grid for electricity, supply is problematic countrywide; with some regional variation, electricity can shut off upwards of seven times a day with each power outage potentially lasting a quarter of an hour or more¹.

Transmitted via power lines from its source in generation plants, electricity is a naturally occurring phenomenon whose control and manipulation vexed humans until the 19th century. It is a commodity that circulates through the everyday lives of consumers in a fashion similar to any other manufactured good. On its journey electricity passes through a variety of politically and socially conditioned ‘regimes of value,’ to borrow Arjun Appadurai’s phrase, that provide electricity with what Appadurai has called a

¹ From my own observations in Barahona, a city of approximately 70,000 people located sixty kilometers east of the border with Haiti, power outages happened at least five times a day for the month I visited.

commodity's 'social life' (Appadurai 1986). Thus for the purposes of this paper I use electricity as a 'cultural' lens with which to view political, social, and economic shifts in the Dominican Republic that transpired over the course of the last half of the 20th century. With electricity as a focal point I proceed to demonstrate how a changing economy and transformations in the relationship between the Dominican state and citizens culminated in the 1996 election of Leonel Fernandez and democratic support for his neo-liberal platform of embracing free-market capitalism and privatization. For upwards of sixty years electricity was supplied to the national grid via the Dominican Electricity Company (CDE), which had been under the ownership of the Dominican state since 1955. This changed in 1999 when Fernandez's administration oversaw the privatization of the CDE and several other state-owned industries.

The 1996 presidential elections were considered by many to be the first fair and democratic elections in Dominican history; to quote Jonathon Hartlyn, the elections were a "watershed" event (Hartlyn 1998:261). The central electoral board, charged with the responsibility of overseeing fair elections, was "committed to well-managed, honest elections" and for the first time since 1966 Joaquin Balaguer would not be running as a presidential candidate (Hartlyn 1998:261). Fernandez's ascendance to the presidency of the Dominican Republic marked a turning point in Dominican politics away from the type of authoritarian rule that characterized the administrations of Joaquin Balaguer (1966-1978, 1986-1996) and his dictatorial predecessor Rafael Trujillo (1930-1961). Under the dictatorship of Trujillo the Dominican state acquired a burgeoning public sector via widespread seizure of privately owned industries.

Nationalization affected both domestic and foreign-owned businesses in the Dominican Republic but in the case of U.S.-owned industries such as the *Compania Electric de Santo Domingo*, foreign interests became the target of Trujillo's nationalist discourse that sought to justify nationalization in part as a protective gesture of a strong, sovereign Dominican state in opposition to the U.S. military intervention between 1916-1924. Sovereignty and independence are narrative themes that run throughout modern Dominican history. Their origins are found in the occupation by Haitian forces of the east half of Hispaniola—at the time called Santo Domingo—which lasted from 1801 to 1844, and, shortly after, in the brief period of annexation to Spain from 1861 to 1865. After Trujillo's assassination in 1961, Balaguer became *the* central figure in Dominican politics from 1965 through the 1990s. Like Trujillo, Balaguer maintained a firm grip on the country's economy with the help of state-controlled industries such as the CDE and the State Sugar Council, but due to a number of changes in the Dominican political economy, such as the growth of electricity consumption amongst both residents and businesses, the rising cost of oil in the 1970s, and the downsizing of the U.S. sugar-import quota for the Dominican Republic, the Balaguer state found it increasingly difficult to provide consistent electricity supply.

The 1996 elections marked a turning point in Dominican history not only regarding the beginning of a new democratic politics and an increasingly engaged civil society. As a presidential candidate for the Dominican Liberation Party, Fernandez had promised “to initiate a wide-ranging modernization program, including privatization of public enterprises” (Metz 2001:117). With electricity supply the responsibility of the

CDE, government administrations were able to offer electricity as a gift to citizens by buffering the price of electricity from fluctuations in cost and shaping electricity supply for citizens into the responsibility of the Dominican state. Democratic support of Fernandez's plans for economic and political reform marked a break with over a half-century of Dominican history in which a powerful state maintained control of much of the economy.

During the first year of his presidency Fernandez presented a set of bills to the Dominican congress, which passed in June, 1997 as the Law for the Public Enterprise Reform, Law No. 141-97, whose purpose was to enable the privatization of multiple state-run enterprises, most notably the *Consejo Estatal del Azucar* (State Sugar Council), a parastatal corporation that oversaw the Dominican sugar industry, and the *Corporacion Dominicana de Electricidad* (Dominican Electric Corporation, or CDE), which had a monopoly over the country's energy sector and the national distribution grid². An argument that could be made—and one to which this paper presents a counterargument—is that privatization and the corresponding shifts in state policy that brought pushed for privatization was somehow inevitable due to economic pressures and ultimately little else. As the result of significant debts inherited by the Fernandez administration in several state-owned enterprises, including but not limited to the electricity sectors, privatization was the only solution left on the table. Privatization was expected to be a panacea for the recurring problems encountered by the CDE throughout the 1970s, 80s, and 90s and analysts hypothesized that privatization would “end...years

² Nov. 7, 1996, Caribbean and Central American Regional Reports, Nov. 7, 1996. Metz 2001:117-118. also see: <http://strategis.ic.gc.ca/epic/internet/inimr-ri.nsf/en/gr109830e.html>).

of inadequate and unreliable power supply”³. However, this perspective neglects the dynamic history of relations between the Dominican state and Dominican citizens and how a state-owned industry such as electricity figured into this relationship.

Before proceeding to the historical inquiry that comprises the body of this essay it is necessary to establish the theoretical parameters of my investigation. In Chapter II I undertake a brief analysis of two concepts prevalent in anthropology—the gift and the commodity—to establish the relationship between citizens in the Dominican Republic and the Dominican state in terms of electricity production and consumption. In 1954-55 Rafael Trujillo struck upon electricity as a commodity with a growing consumer base and an increasingly important role to play in fostering a growing modern economy that could, through nationalization of the country’s electricity industry and the deployment of an accompanying state discourse of protectionism and nationalism, serve the interests of the dictator’s regime. In essence electricity supply became a gift of the state, the consumption of which helped to shore up consent for Trujillo’s increasingly alienating policies which were, beginning in the 1950s, the catalyst for growing disdain for the dictator’s absolute grip on Dominican society.

In Chapter III I look at the meaning given to electricity at the first moments of its introduction to the Dominican Republic in relation to political and economic developments that, in the eyes of some Dominican intellectuals, threatened national sovereignty. Electricity became an available source of energy in urban locales in the early 1890s. During this era, the growth of large-scale agriculture and efforts at

³ Privatization International, July 1999.

modernization by the Dominican state under the administration of Ulises Heaureux imbued electricity with a significance that went beyond it being simply a sign of technological progress and development. As the country became increasingly in debt to foreign lenders over the costs of railroad construction and other modernizing projects, electricity, newly accessible for a small but vocal section of the population, became the focus of debates surrounding the value and meaning of modernization and the implications for the nation of the growth of capitalist agriculture in which foreign investment, primarily coming from the U.S. after 1900, played a significant role. Electricity was thus incorporated into discussions pertaining to independence and sovereignty, themes that had discursive resonance when Trujillo sought to nationalize electricity in part as a means of reinforcing the patrimonial, protectionist appearance of his regime.

Chapter IV then looks at the last years of the era of Trujillo, a period that came on the heels of an eight-year U.S. military intervention (1916-1924) and, prior to that, a decades-long U.S. Customs-Receiver'ship, both of which represented a loss of sovereignty to many Dominican observers. Under Trujillo, state discourse pertaining to nationalization of the country's electricity industry employed an ideology of sovereignty, independence, and resistance to the incursion of external political and economic forces. In shaping his discourse around independence and sovereignty Trujillo was also placing nationalization in opposition to the United States military occupation from 1916-1924, also addressed in Chapter IV, and the customs-receivership that preceded the occupation.

Nationalization of the country's electricity sector was called an act of Dominicanization⁴ and Trujillo assured that all who desired electricity (in areas located in proximity to the national grid) could rely on the regime—and, after Trujillo's assassination, the Dominican state—for their electricity needs, even if money and affordability was an issue. Using electricity as the object of exchange, the regime thus entered into a gifting relationship with citizens; in turn it was expected that allegiance to the Trujillo regime would be secured.

Electricity consumption grew throughout the years following Trujillo's assassination in 1961 and as urbanization rates increased and the national electric grid spread outwards from urban centers such as Santo Domingo and Santiago, electricity became a normalized facet of everyday life for increasing numbers of Dominicans. Electricity supply continued to be the responsibility of the state, although it is important to note that electricity was no longer discursively politicized to the same degree that it was at the moment of its nationalization under Trujillo. Nevertheless, electricity did not cease to be an important commodity of exchange between the Dominican state and citizens. Chapter V traces the transforming relationship between the Dominican state and citizens during the post-Trujillo era as it pertains to the gifting of electricity supply. Joaquin Balaguer, essentially the second in command under Trujillo for the last years of the dictator's regime, served as president of the republic from 1966-1978 and again from 1986 to 1996. Balaguer's presidency was in large part a continuation of the authoritarian rule that had characterized the years under Trujillo. Balaguer maintained a near-absolute

⁴ See, Turits 2003:237-240, and Section IV of this paper for more on 'Dominicanization.'

grip on the nation's economy and subjected his political enemies to police surveillance, intimidation, and violence. Changing patterns in electricity consumption amongst residential consumers and industrial/business interests, regarding the latter specifically in tourism and export-manufacturing (free-trade zones), made stable electricity supply an increasingly important concern for the Dominican state. Citizens demanded electricity supply for their day-to-day consumption habits as lights, radios, televisions, air conditioners, and refrigerators became integrated into everyday life. At the same time the electrical infrastructure of the CDE was deteriorating due to financial restraints facing the state-owned company and this impinged severely on the state's ability to regularly supply electricity to consumers.

Electricity and El Faro a Colon

In Chapter IV, focusing on the last years of the Trujillo dictatorship, and Chapter V, focusing on the Balaguer administrations in the post-Trujillo era, I use the *El Faro a Colon* (the Columbus Memorial Lighthouse) to illustrate the complex of shifting relationships involving electricity, the Dominican state, and Dominican citizens. Under Trujillo state-sponsored spectacles of enormous proportions were utilized as strategic displays of national power and sovereignty, signifying to Dominicans that their country was no longer shackled to U.S. economic and political domination and that they had Trujillo, their benefactor, to thank. Plans to construct the Columbus Memorial Lighthouse were indefinitely put on hold after the laying of its foundations in 1948, but the combination of electrical lighting and a state-sponsored construction project of such

immensity illustrates how electricity became entwined symbolically—through electricity’s use in displays of sovereignty and national strength—and literally—through practices of electricity consumption and control by the state—in the relationship between citizens and the state.

In 1992 Joaquin Balaguer oversaw the completion of the Columbus Lighthouse for the 500th anniversary of Columbus’s landing in the New World but decided to cancel its inauguration ceremony due to violent protests and social turbulence. This unrest grew from an array of political and economic factors that ultimately stemmed from objections over the policies of the Balaguer administration. Electrical power outages were a primary factor contributing to the ire of protesting citizens. Under Trujillo the lighthouse was envisioned as a display of how far the Dominican Republic had come since the U.S. occupation of 1916-1924, and, of course, a testimony to the leadership and vision of Trujillo. By 1992 the lighthouse had become indicative of the final dissolution of the authoritarian-patrimonial Dominican state that began with Trujillo and ended with Balaguer⁵. While power outages across the national grid affected millions of people daily, the state under Balaguer saw fit to use electric lighting as an essential facet of the Columbus memorial. Where as once electricity was utilized in order to show the state’s concern for its citizens, the absence of anything resembling consistent electricity supply made it clear to citizens in 1992 that the relationship which had existed under Trujillo, and until the tail end of Balaguer’s first term (1966-1978), had come to an end⁶. Four

⁵ For a discussion of the historicity of narratives of Christopher Columbus and Europe’s first encounter with the ‘New World’ see Trouillot 1995.

⁶ In August, 1990 The Economist reported that electricity supply was down to four hours a day in Santo Domingo.

years after Balaguer cancelled and then significantly downsized the lighthouse inauguration Leonel Fernandez became president in the first elections since 1966 in which Joaquin Balaguer was not running as a candidate⁷. The Columbus Memorial Lighthouse thus acts as two nodes on a historical trajectory with which I am able to show how electricity has figured into transformations in the relationship between Dominican citizens and the state.

In his book *Cuban Counterpoint* Fernando Ortiz effectively showed tobacco and sugar to be receptacles of Cuban history, commodities that embody the complex and often violent relationship of consumption and production tying colony to empire. In essence narrating for these two commodities something similar to what Igor Kopytoff called a thing's "cultural biography," Ortiz's project could be, and in many ways has been, extended to any number of goods and the societies in which they circulate (1986:64). In this paper I use electricity as one such receptacle by which Dominican history, politics, and culture may be explored, demonstrating, I hope, a novel perspective of how a commodity of everyday importance to a wide array of people is central to transformations in relations between citizens and the states under which they live.

⁷ Regarding the fairness and transparency of the 1996 elections, Hartlyn explains that it was widely agreed that the central electoral board in the Dominican Republic, charged with the responsibility of overseeing fair elections, was "committed to well-managed, honest elections" (Hartlyn 1998:261).

Chapter II -- Taming Electricity: Electricity as a Gifted Commodity

Electricity is a commodity that circulates between the state and ‘residential’ electricity consumers in the Dominican Republic. I am interested in how political and economic change, as well as changes in the consumption practices of electricity consumers, has interacted with this relationship. This chapter outlines the theoretical framework that underlay the analysis I put forth in this paper. I draw on Arjun Appadurai’s (1986) essay in *The Social Life of Things: commodities in a cultural perspective* as it allows us to approach electricity as a commodity—that is, as an economic good—circulating within specific culturally-conditioned “regimes of value.” This phrase encourages an analysis of commodities that pays attention to how commodities circulate within specific cultural and historical milieus and, as they circulate

between consumers and producers, what is their interaction with power—which in the case of the Dominican Republic and electricity is manifested in a succession of government administrations, which is to say in the state (1986:4). Appadurai writes in order to “demystify the demand side of economic life,” which encourages a perspective of commodities that asks why certain commodities take on certain meanings, and how the circulation of certain commodities comes to interact with power, or politics in a general sense, and desire. In his section on ‘desire and demand,’ Appadurai argues for a perspective of commodity circulation that sees “short-term and long-term patterns” in their circulation as being “subject to social control and political redefinition” (1986:6).

Electricity, however, does not fit quite so comfortably into the framework established by Appadurai in his introductory essay, as he himself acknowledges. The essays, explains Appadurai, are “titled” toward “specialized” and “luxury goods”; electricity would more likely be characterized as a “primary” or “bulk” commodity. Appadurai also notes that the essays obtain more to “goods” than to “services,” “though the latter are obviously important objects of commoditization as well” (1985:6). Again, electricity seems to exemplify the latter. What are the implications of endeavoring to study a primary, service-oriented commodity?

Service commodities offer a comparative advantage over any other type of commodity as a strategic good for cooptation by governments. Service commodities might otherwise be defined as goods within a market that are deemed necessary by a broad expanse of people on a regular basis. This is in contrast to luxury goods, for which demand can rise tectonically and fall precipitously according to seemingly arbitrary

sociocultural whims⁸. Electricity in its commodity form is defined as a “service...that is provided by a public utility”⁹. Indeed, it is a service for which there is daily global demand in this age of personal electronics such as computers, televisions, refrigeration, and air conditioning, to say nothing of an entire economy of production and consumption reliant upon its energy.

Contemporary discourse surrounding electricity treats its service as an essential need in the modern world. The most impoverished areas on earth are generally described as ‘lacking sanitation, clean water, and electricity’ and although this paper is peripherally interested in how electricity has become ‘naturalized’ as a bare necessity for human life, we cannot assume that demand for electricity, to use Appadurai’s words, is something “by its nature...fixed” (1986:29). Appadurai points out a tendency to differentiate between demand and desire, viewing the former to be fixed and dictated by need, and the latter to be “infinite and transcultural” (1986:29). He argues, however, that demand ought to be treated as an “aspect of the overall political economy of societies” (1986:29). It is the purpose of this paper to locate electricity as a commodity desired by Dominican consumers in relationship to the Dominican state’s efforts at controlling the meaning of electricity consumption, that is, of the desire for electricity. The societies to which Appadurai is referring, in particular regarding the essays that follow his own, while they might exist within the boundaries of organized nation-states, function on a much smaller scale regarding commodity circulation than does a commodity such as electricity in the Dominican Republic. This makes the effort of finding how electricity interacts with

⁸ For one example among many in the United States, see the ‘Tickle Me Elmo’ craze of the mid-nineties.

⁹ American Heritage Dictionary

political power—presented here by the Dominican state—not particularly difficult. The same cannot be said of uncovering how this interaction changes over time and the many political, economic, and social issues that affect this interaction.

In part this paper uses electricity as a focal point to trace the dissolution of patrimonial relations between the Dominican state and its citizens. Jonathon Hartlyn (1998) made neopatrimonialism the focus of his study of the struggle for democratic politics in the Dominican Republic. The differences between ‘patrimonialism’ on the one hand and ‘neopatrimonialism’ on the other pertain to a “combination of attributional similarities and typological differences in domination” (Hartlyn 1998:14). The former term derives from Weber’s usage which referenced government rule based on the traditional authority of royal households. The latter, ‘modern’ adaptation refers to a structure of political rule in which there is a “centralization of power in the hands of a ruler who seeks to reduce the autonomy of his followers by generating ties of loyalty and dependence, commonly through complex patron-client linkages” (Hartlyn 1998:14). For the sake of clarity I will be using the term ‘patrimonial’ throughout this paper, though the differences between the two related terms should be noted.

To establish part of the theoretical framework underlying the analysis I make of electricity and relations of the state to its citizens during and after the Trujillo era, it is helpful to look at the actions of the patrimonial state in terms of the gifting of electricity. The concept of the gift, made famous by Marcel Mauss, is generally reserved for use in ‘primitive’ or small-scale noncapitalist societies. There is a tendency to see gift

exchange and commodity exchange as “fundamentally contrastive and mutually exclusive” (1986:11). Appadurai writes:

“Gifts, and the spirit of reciprocity, sociability, and spontaneity in which they are typically exchanged, usually are starkly opposed to the profit-oriented, self-centered, and calculated spirit that fires the circulation of commodities” (Appadurai 1986:11).

My analysis suggests that the gifting of electricity was an essential aspect of the construction and solidification of the relationship between the patrimonial Dominican state and its citizens. In her dissertation study of civic culture under the dictatorship of Rafael Trujillo, Lauren Derby (1998) pointed to the importance of gifting in creating a “culture of citizenship” between Dominican citizens and the Trujillo state. To quote Derby: “sumptuary expenditure became the central reason of state” under Trujillo and in essence the dictator “merged the logic of the market with that of the gift” (1998:12). The sort of ‘public largesse,’ to use Derby’s phrase, evident under Trujillo did not continue unchecked in the three decades separating Trujillo’s rule from the administration of Leonel Fernandez. Electricity nevertheless remained an industry of primary importance to the Dominican state for two reasons: the growing importance of electricity for economic growth and development across the 1970s, 80s, and 90s and citizen’s expectations of state-supplied electricity, the origins of which lay in the gifting relationship established under Trujillo.

Privatization and Post-Cold War Economic Transformation

The argument for the apparent inevitability of privatization in the Dominican Republic, mentioned briefly above in the introduction, has something to do with global political and economic transformations in the post-cold war era. It is tempting to explain away the transition to a government administration with neo-liberal policies as fall out from the end of the cold war and the “recent stage of economic globalization” which followed (Lutz and Nonini 1999:77-78). Regarding the economic transformations affecting nation-states and their interaction with the global economy in the years leading up to and following the end of the cold war (approximately 1992), Catherine Lutz and Donald Nonini write:

“as a result of liberalization in transnational capital flows, of the creation of new institutions for regulating global and regional economies [such as the International monetary Fund, World Trade Organization, and World Bank] and of privatization and contraction in state revenues, the capacities of nation-states to control their economies...and resident populations have been significantly reduced” (Lutz and Nonini 1999:78).

From this perspective, states desire control of the national economy as means of controlling their citizenry, and the state’s ability to exercise this control is inhibited by international monetary organizations such as the IMF, World Bank, and other lending institutions that make free market policies their baseline requirements for providing monetary assistance to a country. It begins to look as if the hegemonic forces of international capitalism simply invade this country or that, subduing the state into accepting the infiltration of the global free market. Little attention is given to the

question of why some countries chose to endorse politicians with neo-liberal policies that encourage the interaction of their country with these monetary institutions and the global market at large.

By making electricity the focus of my analysis, I suggest that beginning roughly in the mid-1970s the Dominican state found it increasingly unable to manufacture control and consent of the population through its inability to maintain a vibrant electricity sector and provide reliable electricity supply. Over time a situation developed from this slow dissolution of the relationship between state and citizens in which privatization and the “liberalization of transnational capital flows” was *desired* by both government and citizens as a solution to the problems plaguing an economy of state-controlled industries, especially pertaining to an industry such as electricity which had an everyday impact on the lives of citizens¹⁰.

If we agree that there is nothing inevitable about privatization, a fact that is testified to by the more than fifty years of state-ownership of multiple industries in the Dominican Republic, we must ask why the neo-liberal shift brought by Fernandez in 1996 came about when it did. Why was privatization not pursued at an earlier moment, and why, after decades of patrimonial¹¹ state policies with which the state acted as the protector of its citizens against growing market prices of goods such as electricity, did voters chose to endorse Fernandez’s plans for relinquishing state control of the economy

¹⁰ Privatization was not the economic panacea some expected it to be. The subsequent struggle for the Dominican Republic to adapt to a privatized, relatively neo-liberal economy is worth investigating at another time, though for the purposes of this paper I am most concerned with how this pathway became a desirable one for administrative policy and supported by a Dominican electorate.

¹¹ This term is covered in more detail below in Section II.

to global market forces and foreign ownership? By looking at electricity and its position in the relationship between the Dominican state and Dominican citizens I show how the ability of the state to maintain its interventionist-protectionist policies were impinged upon by a number of factors pertaining to changes in the national economy, in political relations between the U.S. and the Dominican Republic, and in changing patterns of electricity consumption amongst Dominican consumers. By making electricity a lens through which to view political and economic change over time, I provide a ‘ground based’ perspective that deals with an everyday issue—electricity supply—to offer one approach to understanding the political and economic shift that came with Fernandez’s 1996 election.

As the Dominican economy underwent a process of ‘diversification’ in the post-Trujillo years of the early 1970s, emphasizing mining, export manufacturing, and tourism in the form of all-inclusive resorts and hotels, electricity demand grew apace with these electricity-intensive industries¹². By the mid-1980s sugar, for a century the country’s staple commodity crop, had been surpassed in revenue-earning power by the tourist industry of hotels and resorts spreading across the northern and eastern coasts of the republic. The beginning of the modern tourist industry in the Dominican Republic, defined here as the movement in government policy toward being able to accommodate in resorts and hotels large numbers of vacationers, can be traced to the 1940s under the Trujillo regime. Although the number of tourists visiting the Dominican Republic waxed and waned through the Trujillo assassination (1961), a civil war (1965) and subsequent

¹² Metz 2001:111.

U.S. military intervention, in 1984 revenue from tourism surpassed the earnings of the sugar industry¹³.

The first free trade zones were established in the 1970s, the number of which grew into the 1980s and 90s. During the 1980s the number of people employed in free trade zones grew from 16,000 to near 100,000 (Metz 2001:111). This is not to say that sugar ceased to be an important export crop for the national economy, but through the rising dominance of tourism and export-manufacturing the Dominican state found itself in a precarious position regarding electricity supply and generation. It became increasingly difficult for the state-owned CDE to balance residential consumer demand with the growing electrical needs of resorts, hotels, and manufacturing industries. As industries began to use private generators to overcome the unreliability of the national grid and the CDE, losing out on the potential revenue of these same industries, struggled to meet the rising demand of residential consumers, the state-citizen relationship that had existed in terms of electricity supply since the 1950s began to dissolve. The stage was thus set for a corresponding political shift, which came with Fernandez's democratic election and the neo-liberal, free market policies his administration encouraged.

Thinking About the Politics of Electricity

In his book *Networks of Power*, Thomas Hughes placed the spread of grid electricity power systems across three major cities at the turn of the 20th century—Berlin, London, and Chicago—in a social context that addressed how, among other things,

¹³ Metz 2001:111.

politics, technological development, and business interests uniquely affected the growth of each city's power system. Hughes writes that "all three [cities] had the same pool of technology to draw from, but because the geographical, cultural, managerial, engineering, and entrepreneurial character of the three regions differed, the power systems were appropriately varied as well" (Hughes 1983:17). In each city growth of its power system was compelled and/or inhibited by certain characteristics unique to each region; in the case of London, one such characteristic was the city's exceptionally (for the time) large population of 7.25 million people and its "extremely complicated administrative structure that defied comprehension by non-Londoners and reform-minded Londoners alike" (1983:229). Politics is indeed very much a part of Hughes analysis, but the degree to which politicians used electricity supply as a political tool of some sort at the highest levels of the state is not known. Hughes does however provide us with a valuable starting point for thinking about the interaction between politics, citizens, and electricity, but in the case of the Dominican Republic further questions must be asked. How does nationalization affect the growth of power systems and consumer access to electricity supply? And how does electricity supply—when under the jurisdiction and operation of the state—interact with and influence the relationship between citizens and the state? How might electricity supply be used by the state as a political tool, one that touches the lives of a wide swath of a population on a daily basis?

In the Dominican Republic, electricity generation and distribution was seized upon by the Trujillo state via nationalization of the country's electricity industry. Discursively this act was presented as an act of nationalism, a gesture of good will by the

patrimonial state to its citizens. The ability of the state to use electricity in this symbolic manner depended upon the state's ability to follow through with supplying electricity to the public. Among other factors, the decline of sugar prices and a rise in oil prices in the 1970s and bureaucratic inefficiency severely limited the growth and upkeep of the country's electricity system as demand for electricity by consumers and businesses continued to grow. As electricity supply became increasingly problematic, this impinged on the ability of the state to gift electricity—a commodity that day-by-day grew more essential to people's lives—leading to a collapse of the gift exchange relationship essential to the patrimonial state. When in the 1980s the state found itself unable to provide constant electricity supply, Balaguer nevertheless attempted to construct a massive, state-sponsored memorial to Christopher Columbus that, despite the country's problematic electricity situation vis-a-vis consumers reliant upon the national grid, would use multiple high-power spotlights (and therefore a large quantity of electricity) to make a luminescent cross in the sky. In the eyes of Dominican citizens, problematic electricity supply was made to reflect all the more harshly on the state than it otherwise might have. Less than three years later in April, 1995 the offices of the CDE were raided by protestors and a year after that, in 1996, Leonel Fernandez was elected president¹⁴.

¹⁴ Latin America Weekly Report, April 6, 1995

Chapter III – Power and Meaning: Electricity and Early Modernization

Everywhere that its energy is manifested on earth—be it as a bolt of lightning or energy generated by a rotating magnetic coil—electricity is bound by unchanging laws of nature that govern its physical properties and attributes. In this chapter I locate electricity in the context of Dominican history, moving electricity from its undifferentiated natural state to its earliest position as a commodity in the Dominican Republic. I establish the relationship of electricity and its meaning as a commodity to cultural and political issues pertaining to modernization and national sovereignty in the late 19th century Dominican Republic. These dual themes of modernization and sovereignty present common threads that run through Dominican history in general and through the Dominican history of electricity in particular. By linking the advent of electricity as a controlled and consumable source of energy in the Dominican Republic with transformations in the country's economy and changing geopolitical relations with the United States, this section establishes the conceptual framework for the analysis carried out in the following sections. Far from presenting an unequivocally positive signifier of 'modernization,' in the 1890s electricity was bound up with issues of political and economic sovereignty that would lend historical meaning to the discourse later used by the Dominican state under Rafael Trujillo to exert control over electricity generation and attempt to influence the very meaning of electricity consumption.

Beginning in the 1890s electricity provided a source of energy for street lamps and telegraph, among other machines, presenting a tangible experience of the country's modernizing landscape. During the late 19th century, electricity, and modernization in general, presented both the possibility of a new era and a looming threat to the nation's well-being as capitalist agriculture and large-scale sugar production began to transform the country¹⁵. Under the regime of Ulises Heureaux (1887-1899), the Dominican state regularly intervened to stimulate modernization in the form of road building, construction of telephone and telegraph lines, and the spread of railroads¹⁶. Funding for these projects often came from foreign loans which resulted in the state becoming increasingly beholden to foreign capital. This created a context in which the appearance of electric lighting and telegraph, among other technologies, in urban areas such as Santo Domingo and Santiago was not accepted as an unambiguous sign of progress.

Electric lighting made its first appearance in the Dominican Republic during an era in which rapid and far-reaching change affected multiple facets of Dominican society. Electricity did not have an immediate impact on the production of sugar or tobacco—the country's two primary crops—but its introduction must be seen in conjunction with the political and economic transformations addressed in this section¹⁷. Michiel Baud (1987) traces the growth of the Dominican sugar industry in the last quarter of the 19th century in part to “a series of ‘modernizing’ governments” which “stimulated capital investment and offered tax exemptions” to new businesses. The dictatorship of Ulises Heureaux was the

¹⁵ See Martinez-Vergne (2005) for a summary of the impact and implications of changing agricultural production practices in the late 19th century Dominican Republic.

¹⁶ Hoetink (1972) covers in detail the changes in what he has called the Dominican communication structure which includes railroads, telegraph, and telephone.

¹⁷ The processing of sugar depended on mills with presses run either by steam or human labor.

“culmination” of this political trend. Effects of the industrialization of sugar production were most perceptible in the south of the country, primarily in the areas around and between Santo Domingo and La Romana, but the modernizing trend in the country and an influx of foreign and domestic business interests impacted rural communities as well. In this era as well the United States began to grow involved as its investors and companies were drawn to the country’s growing economy.

Electricity, Modernization, and Sugar Under Heureaux

Electricity’s relationship to large-scale sugar production found expression under Heureaux when urbanization, the country’s growing wealth from sugar production, and an authoritarian government pushed for modernization. In no small part due to the Republic’s growing debt and an increase of foreign capital and influence in the economy—corollary affects of modernization and the expanding sugar industry—electricity became a site at which modernization and the value of progress was set against the symbolic and real costs incurred by the nation. “Neither the transformation nor the ideology of progress,” writes Teresita Martinez-Vergne, “was exempt from conflict.”

“Sugar had brought, along with economic prosperity, the dispossession of peasants in some areas, the importation of workers from the West Indies, foreign investment, and other changes about which even the proponents of modernization were uneasy” (Martinez-Vergne 2005:1).

As a commodity imbued with cultural significance, the meaning of electricity's availability as a consumable energy source within the context of late 19th century Dominican history is contested and dynamic. Electricity was not an unambiguous symbol of progress but instead, due to the political and economic circumstances under which it was introduced, electricity embodied intimations of a movement toward the loss of financial and political independence to foreign interests and the alienation of a largely rural population dependent upon access to lands in the process of being absorbed by large-scale sugar production.

Baud (1987) amply summarizes from a global perspective “the structural changes in the capitalist world system during the second half of the nineteenth century” which resonated through “peripheral economies” such as the Dominican Republic's and throughout the Caribbean and Latin America:

“Improvements in transportation and the increasing demand for tropical consumer goods in the industrializing countries caused unprecedented growth in the production of tropical export crops and a consequent international movement of agricultural commodities...Increased competition for tropical commodities among industrializing countries made controlling their production more attractive. In the Dominican Republic, this goal meant fostering sugar plantations that were mostly financed by Cuban and U.S. capital” (Baud 1987:135-140).

Lauren Derby has also pointed out that it was during this period, beginning in the late 19th century and extending up to the dictatorship of Rafael Trujillo (1930-1961), that state growth resulting from “increased government revenues and a new liberal vision of the state” began to take place (1994:501). By the end of the 19th century sugar was beginning to outpace tobacco as the commercial crop upon which the country would rely for its

economic base (although, as Baud notes, sugar cane production was not yet the dominant force in the Dominican economy) (1987:135). At the same time the country was finding itself subjected to the growing economic and political influence of United States. Both factors had significant affect on the development and spread of electrical power in the Dominican Republic and upon the cultural implications of electricity within early Dominican understandings of modernity.

H. Hoetink (1972) has documented the introduction of electric lighting and other changes in what he calls ‘the structure of communication’ in the Dominican Republic. Although the Dominican Republic in the late 19th was “unevenly modernized,” where electricity consumption was enabled by the construction of electric street lamps and telegraph lines electricity became modernization made tangible. In 1893 the city council of Santo Domingo sought to issue bonds for the purpose of installing electric lighting in urban areas. Three years later the government of the province of Santo Domingo received from the Ministry of the Treasury and Commerce a monthly sum “in order to attend to the expense of electric light for the citadel, military hospital, province government palace, [and] police barracks” (Hoetink 1972: 47-63). In this way electricity became a commodity available to people living in urban areas and working in government occupations. Other changes in the structure of communication in the Dominican Republic included the construction of railroads, the building of telegraph lines and the introduction of schools for “practical telegraphy,” as well as the first telephone conversation in 1886 between an Electric Company administrator and the Rector of the Colegio San Luis Gonzaga.

Between 1844—the year the Dominican Republic gained independence from a Haitian interim government—and 1880, the northern cities of Santiago and Puerto Plata became important commercial centers due to the development of the region’s tobacco industry. The social implications of transformations in agricultural practices and state efforts of modernizing the country are evident in the growing importance of Santo Domingo, the capital of the Dominican Republic. During colonial times Santo Domingo had been home to the Spanish colonial government but was dwarfed in financial importance by northern cities in the tobacco-producing Cibao region. It was not until the last two decades of the 19th century that Santo Domingo became the country’s commercial center, resulting from the development of the country’s modern sugar industry. As Frank Moya Pons (1994:194-194) notes, between 1875 and 1895 more than twenty sugar mills were installed in the region surrounding Santo Domingo, helping to transform it into the country’s most important city. The urban population each of Santiago, Puerto Plata, and Santo Domingo did not exceed 10,000 in the 1880s. Yet by the 1920s Santo Domingo’s population had reached approximately 40,000 which helped bring the country’s urban population to 16.6 percent of the total population.

The number of people calling Santo Domingo home began to grow with the commencement of large-scale sugar production. According to Hoetink, in the years between 1875 and 1882 thirty centralized cane plantations, or ‘cane haciendas,’ were established. Though the investment of “some considerable domestic capital” was important to the growth of haciendas, an influx of “large amounts of foreign capital imported by...Cuban immigration” also contributed significantly (Hoetink 1972:4). And

with the cane haciendas Santo Domingo grew as an increasing number of businesses such as machine shops, apothecaries, and commercial factories opened, placing the city on pace to beat out Santiago, despite it having the potential to become “a second Chicago,” in size and commercial importance (1972:44).

The Costs of Modernization: U.S. Customs-Receivership

The investment of foreign and domestic capital during the tenure of Heureaux’s dictatorship helped along “the hand of Progress” in several significant facets of Dominican society. With the construction of new roads connecting sugar plantations built east of Santo Domingo and railroads stretching through the Cibao region to the Bay of Semana in the east, urban and rural communities became connected to a degree hitherto unseen (1972: 52-56, 1995:454). These displays of modernization, however, came at a price as the Dominican Republic acquired increasing amounts of debt with foreign business interests. By amassing government debt to foreign lenders, Heureaux moved the country toward the customs-receivership established in 1905 by the United States government after acquiring the debt owed to the San Domingo Improvement Company. “The entrance of the San Domingo Improvement Company into Dominican finances gave the United States unprecedented influence over the country.” (1995:272). Under Heureaux, Westendorp & Company of Amsterdam, Holland sold its interests in the Dominican Republic to the San Domingo Improvement Company thus financially embroiling a company from the United States in the economic affairs of the Dominican government.

The San Domingo Improvement Company consisted of a group of United States' capitalists, several of which were government officials. Intending to construct a railroad connecting Santiago and Puerto Plata Heureaux had secured two substantial loans in 1890 and 1892 from Westendorp & Company. With Westendorp & Company moving toward bankruptcy, in March of 1893 the San Domingo Improvement Company obtained, with Heureaux's consent, full ownership of Westendorp & Company's interests in the Dominican Republic. By year's end the government was 17 million pesos in debt, in part due to the civil war that preceded Heureaux's presidency, but due also to the subsequent loans Heureaux secured as the condition under which he would accept the transfer of interests from one company to the other (1995:271-278). By the first years of the 1900s it was clear to the San Domingo Improvement Company that the Dominican Republic was not in financial shape to repay the debts the Company had acquired. Appeals to the U.S. government to intervene in the situation lead to the establishment of a customs-receivership in 1905 whereby all goods entering and leaving the Dominican Republic were taxed by U.S. custom houses with the intention of settling the country's outstanding debts.

In several instances the press showed its enthusiasm for a modernized Dominican Republic, imagining that the industrialization of sugar production and technological developments would offer a counterweight to political infighting and instability. In 1877, too early perhaps to see the government's financial problems that lay ahead, the *Gaceta de Santo Domingo* ran a series of articles covering changes in the technology of sugar production whose title suggested such improvements would be "la salvacion del pais,"

while the first telephone call in the Dominican Republic 1886 garnered an emphatic “Hurray for progress” from an article in *La Cronica—Religion, Ciencias, Artes y Literatura*¹⁸ (1987:141, 1972:58). However, not all with outspoken opinions were as willing to as the press to imagine modernization as being the miraculous salvation of their country.

Although often times reliant upon government appointments, a number of the country’s most prominent intellectuals, or “men of letters” as Martinez-Vergne names them, took seriously their position as members of the “intelligentsia” and worked to develop a “common sense of nationhood” (2005:3). Despite being under the employ of the oppressive government of Ulises Heureaux, not all of the country’s intellectual elite was hesitant to express their reservations about the direction in which the country was moving. Jose Ramon Lopez and Pedro Francisco Bono in particular both expressed in writing and speeches their concern with the country’s peasantry as United State’s capital and other foreign business interests contributed to the growing sugar industry that threatened “the small independent farmers on whose progress the traditional wealth of the country depended” (1995:261; 2005:5). To conclude this section I look at an article published in *El Eco de la Opinion*, a respected newspaper published in the Dominican Republic at the end of the 19th century. In this article we are able to observe the contours of electricity’s relationship to issues of sovereignty and discussions of the toll taken by modernization on the national body of the Dominican Republic.

La Senora Electricity

¹⁸ “At 5 p.m. the Rector of the Colegio San Luis Gonzaga greeted Sr. Naasson, administrator of the Electric Company, from his school by means of the telephone. Hurray for Progress!”

In an article published by a Dominican correspondent in New York City electricity figures prominently as a central literary device for discussing the costs of modernization—represented by the recently developed ability in the United States and Europe to control and harness electrical power, a development that was just reaching the Dominican Republic in the 1890s—and of foreign financial influence in the republic, especially regarding the United States. The author explains that electricity is a mysterious, ubiquitous force that appears when he shuffles his feet across the carpet of his apartment and that the subsequent static spark can be used to light the fuse of his stove. He explains that electricity is an indigenous force of nature located within all humans. This force, he continues, can cure migraines through the application of an electric charge to the head, but electricity will just as easily kill people under different circumstances; electricity is thus both ‘fairy’ and ‘devil.’ The author proceeds to explain theories regarding the power of electricity to help agriculture when a current is applied to the soil. The article then introduces electricity as a female character (*la senora electricidad*) in an exchange with Thomas Edison, whose relationship to electricity is part of the canon of scientific history¹⁹.

Martinez-Vergne has analyzed the story in terms of representations of gender relations at the end of the 19th century in the Dominican Republic. Her reading presents one layer of interpretation to which I here add a second. My intention is to emphasize that part of the exchange that implicates electricity, represented by the woman Electricity, as a guilty partner in the changes affecting the country via modernization and the support

¹⁹ Beyond scientific history, Hughes has shown the social-technological history behind Edison and electricity.

of politicians such as Heaureux of bringing technological progress to the Dominican Republic. The woman Electricity is accused by Edison of being lascivious and uncontrollable, having passed through the hands of Italian, German, and French men. Edison, however, is able to ‘tame’ Electricity, which results in Edison being able to exploit Electricity; to “treat her as a wretch” and make “her work from six to six as if she were black.” Martinez-Vergen explains that, “the reader is expected to immediately reject as unthinkable” the comment about Edison treating Electricity “like an African slave.” Electricity blames herself for falling for a “Yankee” but despite being exploited and degraded by Edison, Electricity does not rebel against him, leading the author to call her “tyrannical.” Edison stands as a white foreigner from the United States, an arrogant and disrespectful man who through his exploitation of La Senora Electricity calls into question her very loyalty to the Dominican Republic: despite exploiting her (and, through her, the nation²⁰) and “living through her effort,” Electricity does not “rebel against her loved tyrant” and for that is a “shameless scoundrel.”

As I mentioned above, the article’s author explains his perspective that electricity is indigenous to humans and the very soil of the earth, located in the brain and in minerals alike. Thomas Edison has not brought electricity to the Dominican Republic because it was always there. However, Thomas Edison, the Yankee, appears to be the only person able to ‘tame’ La Senora. What we might glean from this allegorical encounter is the author’s somewhat cryptic acknowledgment that ‘modernization’ in the late 19th century Dominican Republic came at a certain cost for the Dominican nation. In the story

²⁰ The female body as symbolizing the nation’s body is explored by Derby (1998) through an analysis of the ceremony, celebration, and ritual surrounding Trujillo’s daughter in the 1950s.

modernization involves sacrificing the honor, respect, and sovereignty of the national body, represented here by the subjugation of the woman Electricity, to the powerful forces of progress and capital being exerted by Europe and the United States. The reader is left to judge for him or herself whether it is worth paying the price of ‘taming’ electricity when this necessitates the presence of a domineering white American who forces Electricity to “do something filthy.” The role performed by Edison, a white foreign (American) male, demonstrates a perspective that is weary of the price of modernization, estimated in this instance at foreign, racist domination.

With this story in mind we can see how the introduction of lights, electric telegraph, and other devices that functioned through electricity being controlled and made to do work (that is, made to be consumed) signaled to some Dominicans their own subjugation to forces beyond their control. The origins of these forces were foreign, not indigenous. The author of the story appears more or less ambivalent, unwilling to offer a normative evaluation of the subjugation of electricity to Thomas Edison—that is, of the Dominican Republic to external forces of modernization—but it is clearly portrayed as a potentially violent and degrading process. The allegory thus illustrates not only “men’s problematic associations with women,” but, as I have argued, an apprehension toward the meaning of a modernizing Dominican Republic, embodied here in a female character called Electricity.

We have seen that electricity was introduced to urban areas of the Dominican Republic as part of Ulises Heureux’s efforts at modernizing the country at a time when large-scale, industrialized sugar production was growing and the amount of foreign

capital invested in the country was increasing. Electricity was a new commodity signifying modernization for those who lived and worked in urban areas, especially in buildings with ties to the government, but for some electricity was implicated in changes that hinted at something ominous on the horizon. This looming specter appeared in the form of the Customs-Receiver'ship and the intervention of the United States military and a military government. With electricity's relationship to modernization and the threat to Dominican sovereignty established, in the next section I look at how electricity became a more widely disseminated and politicized commodity under Trujillo as his regime, amounting wealth to a degree never before seen in the country, sought to sustain its nationalist-populist project against foreign domination. This took place as the regime's policies, in the last decade of Trujillo's rule, simultaneously undermined its own credibility with the Dominican population.

Chapter IV – Electricity and the Dictatorship of Rafael Trujillo

In this chapter I explore the dual mobilization of electricity under the dictatorship of Rafael Trujillo, first as part of state-sponsored projects displaying the symbolic strength of the nation, and second as a political tool to shore up support for the regime through nationalization of the electricity industry and paternal-nationalist discourse. The Columbus Memorial Lighthouse (El Faro a Colon) is demonstrative of an instance in which electricity was to be utilized in symbolic representations of the strength,

independence, and modernity of the Dominican Republic under Trujillo. Although construction for the five-story, 210-meter long cross-shaped lighthouse stopped shortly after its foundations were laid in 1948, the Memorial Lighthouse provides a lens with which to view the implications of electricity's political mobilization via nationalization. The Dominican state's acquisition of the means of electricity generation and distribution in 1955 served the interests of Trujillo's nationalist-populist project but nationalization would have implications reaching far beyond the dictator's tenure, as we will see below in Section V.

The Columbus Memorial Lighthouse is a symbol with multiple meanings, one of which pertains to the Dominican Republic's Spanish-Catholic heritage through its tie to Christopher Columbus, another which represents a Pan-American vision of unity between Spanish-speaking countries in Latin America and the Caribbean. These meanings are significant and worth investigating in another study, but I am interested in the changing political-economic conditions under Trujillo's dictatorship—as they pertain to electricity—that made the (potential) construction of such a massive project a politically viable undertaking for Trujillo's regime. The decision to construct the lighthouse is an early display of the 'magical modernity' of the Dominican state under Trujillo, about which Lauren Derby (1998) has explored in great depth. Derby identifies the World Fair of Peace and Brotherhood sponsored by the Trujillo state in 1955 as the epitome of this magical modernity, but Trujillo's intention of building the lighthouse shows a preceding moment in which electricity and the relative wealth of the Trujillo state combined to

emphasize the distance between, among other events, the U.S. military intervention of 1916-1924 and the reformation of the Dominican state under Trujillo.

With powerful beams of light emitting the shape of a cross thousands of feet into the sky, the lighthouse would serve to connect the ‘newly modern’ Dominican Republic under Trujillo with the country’s historical memory of being home to the first capital established by Europeans in the New World²¹. As a state project conceived prior to the nationalization of the electricity industry in 1955, the lighthouse presents a contrast between the state’s two-fold mobilization of electricity, first as a means for projecting outward the modernity of the Dominican Republic, and second as a symbol of the Trujillo regime’s orientation toward nationalist-paternalism in the face of the dictator’s growing accumulation of capital at the expense of Dominican citizens. In the late 1940s and early 1950s under the economically prosperous Trujillo regime and its discourse of nationalist-populism, a perceived alignment of desires existed between citizens and the state. This alignment of desires was manifested through what Turits (2003) has called an ‘alternative modernity’ which saw the regime supporting rural peasants against encroaching sugar interests. However, as Trujillo began to consolidate the economy of the Dominican Republic into a private state-owned business the modernity that had served to support his regime, especially amongst the rural peasantry, began to unravel.

²¹ Christian Krohn-Hansen (2001) has explored the racist implications of El Faro a Colon through its symbolic power as a memorial to Christopher Columbus. El Faro a Colon serves as a testament to the desire of Dominican political elites and the state to construct ‘Dominicanness’ in terms of a heritage linked to white Europeans. This equating of ‘Dominican’ with ‘white’ is a problematic site of exclusion from political constructions of what it means to be Dominican. This goes especially for Dominicans with known Haitian ancestry and for Haitians living in the Dominican Republic.

Nationalization of the electricity industry became one way of attempting to reassert this modernity of populism and maintain support for the regime's policies.

U.S. Military Intervention, 1916-1924 and Sovereignty Regained

Before proceeding to electricity's position in the era of Trujillo it is necessary to outline the period of United States intervention as it set the political and economic conditions for Trujillo's rise to power and would act as a backdrop for nationalization and Trujillo's discourse of protectionism vis-a-vis foreign influence in Dominican politics and business²². If we recall that a customs-receivership was established in 1905 after the San Domingo Improvement Company acquired the debt owed by the Dominican Republic to European interests after the dictatorship of Ulises Heureaux. In November 1916 the United States, through the persona of navy commander Captain Harry S. Knapp, declared the establishment of a U.S. military government in the Dominican Republic. With Knapp as Military Governor, the legislative and executive branches of the Dominican government "disappeared." Executive orders issued by the military government prohibited Dominicans from occupying any cabinet posts related to control of the police or military arms of the government. By July 1916 the U.S. military had been present in the Dominican Republic for two months, having landed troops on Dominican soil in early May of that year. With U.S. troops present the Dominican congress elected Federico Henriquez y Carvajal president in July. By November 1916

²² The history covered in the paragraph that follows is taken from Calder 1984:8-12.

the United States decided on military intervention after *caudillo* political in-fighting resumed despite the occupying military presence.

The U.S. military government allowed for a provisional Dominican government to regain administrative control in October 1922 and two years later, searching for a way to extricate itself from the occupation, Horacio Vasquez became president as the United States withdrew from the country, remaining in power until his overthrow by the conspiring of Rafael Estrella Urena, a politician from Santiago, and Rafael Leonidas Trujillo Molina, a commander in the recently formed Dominican National Army, in 1930²³. Although the original agreement between Urena and Trujillo involved Urena becoming president, Trujillo showed that in the quest for power any alliance could be broken. Using his prestige in the military, Trujillo quickly deposed Urena and installed himself president and Chief Benefactor of the Dominican Republic.

If in the 1890s electricity was implicated, at least on a symbolic level, in problematic political and economic developments in the Dominican Republic, this perspective did not lessen with the establishment of the United State's Customs Receivership in 1905 and the advent of the U.S. military government in 1916. Electricity's relationship to modernization, and modernization's relationship to foreign intervention and the loss of economic and political sovereignty did help ensure that the electricity industry, which was owned by a U.S. company, would become a strategic part of Rafael Trujillo's efforts at casting his acquisition of foreign-owned businesses and financial interests in nationalist and paternalist terms. It is under Trujillo that the

²³ See Calder a detailed historical account of the period of United States military occupation from 1916 to the establishment of the provisional Dominican government. Frank Moya Pons writes, "To some extent the government of...Vasquez was merely an extension of the U.S. Military occupation" (1995:342).

Dominican electricity grid began to disseminate across the country, integrating itself into the daily lives of people outside of the larger urban centers and becoming a service commodity along side water and telephone service (2003:235).

The meaning of the impact of U.S. intervention in the region, like electricity's ambiguous meaning in the 1890s, has the potential to be read as a blessing or a curse depending on one's perspective. As Bruce Calder (1984) has shown, significant amounts of funding for infrastructure such as roads, electric transmission lines, hospitals, and housing came as a result of United States intervention. The creation of the Dominican National Army also took place under United States' tutelage, the consolidation of which would assist Rafael Trujillo in establishing and maintaining his regime. As I have mentioned above, the struggle for political and economic sovereignty is a theme that runs throughout Dominican history and in this regard U.S. intervention, both in its financial and military formations, was a serious blow to Dominican sovereignty and the perceived health of the nation. The steps taken by the Trujillo regime to restore financial independence to the republic were thus part of a broader ideological mission of manufacturing consent amongst the Dominican populace for Trujillo's nationalist-patrimonial state.

Under Trujillo the Dominican government paid off its debt to the United States, an amount of nearly \$10 million that originally grew from the U.S. government acquiring the debt owed to the San Domingo Improvement Company in the first decade of the 1900s. This debt had "provided one of the pretexts...for the U.S. occupation" and its liquidation took place "amid great nationalist fanfare" (2003:234). This served to reaffirm

Trujillo's position as the Chief Benefactor of the Dominican Republic, the leader who reinvigorated the nation beyond any prior level and restored its sovereignty which had been compromised repeatedly since the Customs Receivership began in 1905. In 1954 Trujillo's government "retired \$31,000,000 worth of internal bonds," and an article ran in *The New York Times* reading, "Trujillo's government is one of few in the world that are not in the red"²⁴. The state under Trujillo possessed an abundance of wealth due to a burgeoning export economy spurred by Trujillo's efforts at expanding the industrial capacity of the country and inflated sugar prices in the global economy due to shortages of tropical commodities after World War II. Within this context the Dominican state could afford to think about and enact public projects that would attest to this singular moment in Dominican history, and, of course, to the symbolic debt owed Trujillo for his role in enabling the conditions making this moment of national strength and vigor possible. The Christopher Columbus Memorial Lighthouse, was to be one such project.

Trujillo and the Columbus Memorial Lighthouse

Trujillo was widely credited as making the Dominican Republic into a 'modern' country. In the U.S. press, "Trujillo's Island" was called "modern and modernistic" while the U.S. ambassador to the Dominican Republic, Ellis Briggs, commented "more over-all progress has been achieved [under Trujillo] than during the preceding 438 years since the discovery of the island by Columbus."²⁵ Though symbolically connecting the

²⁴ *The New York Times*, Jan. 6, 1954.

²⁵ *The New York Times*, April 12, 1953. Briggs quoted in Turits 2003:232. Though it seems that at the time few acknowledged the transformative role of the U.S. military government in overseeing infrastructural developments in the form of urban and (limited) rural construction projects and political-structural developments in the reformation of the Dominican government and military.

Dominican Republic of the 1940s with the island's long history as Europe's first encounter with the New World, the Columbus Lighthouse nevertheless demonstrated Trujillo's power and command of the country, as well as his desire to project that image outward to the world. It was decided during a conference in 1948 at the National University of Paraguay that the light emitted in rays of "sanguine red" from El Faro a Colon was to be a cross representing "Modern Progress"²⁶. The very ability of the Dominican Republic to undertake the production of such a structure, equipped with lights meant to project a cross thousands of feet into the air, showed the country to be modern in an unprecedented way. The state's concern with electricity, manifested here through the use of multiple lights beaming into the Caribbean sky, is one of the celebration and visibility of a modern Dominican Republic.

The idea for *El Faro a Colon* is attributed to Antonio Delmonte y Tejada in his *Historia de Santo Domingo* published in 1852. In an article published in 'El Faro a Colon,' a publication of speeches and articles organized by *El Comite Ejecutivo Permanente Del Faro De Colon*, Delmonte y Tejada is called "the father of Dominican history" and the Dominican Republic's "Herodotus"²⁷. Delmonte y Tejada envisioned a memorial that would connect the Dominican Republic of his day with its Spanish heritage and pride in being home to the first capital established by Europeans in the New World. As Delmonte y Tejada conceived of it, the memorial would be located in "the first city of America," Santo Domingo, at a "central point...close to the coast"²⁸. El

²⁶ *El Faro a Colon*, 1952, *Ano III*, *Num. VI*, pp. 73-74.

²⁷ *El Faro a Colon*, 1952, *Ano III*, *Num. VI*, pp. 50.

²⁸ Quoted in *El Faro a Colon*, 1952, *Ano III*, *Num. VI*, pp. 50.

Comite Ejecutivo Permanente Del Faro De Colon, established in 1949 at the behest of Rafael Trujillo, brought together politicians and intellectuals to discuss the historical importance and meaning of El Faro a Colon²⁹. Inside of the structure would reside what was believed to be the remains of Christopher Columbus, the Genoan explorer who claimed the island of Hispaniola for Spain in 1492. From the top of the lighthouse multiple beams of light would stretch thousands of feet into the sky, acting as a beacon in theory visible throughout the Caribbean. Although the foundations of El Faro a Colon were laid in 1948, the structure would not be completed until 1990 during the last years of Joaquin Balaguer's second term as president-dictator.

Electricity, Nationalization, and the Wealth of the State Under Trujillo

The relative wealth of the Dominican Republic throughout the first quarter of the 20th century and into the era of Trujillo's rule is directly related to the vicissitudes of sugar prices in the global commodities market. Other products such as cacao, coffee, and tobacco also figured prominently into the country's economic health, but during periods in which sugar was scarce in the global market, such as during World War I and II, this "rise in sugar prices had a positive effect on the whole Dominican economy." For example, the rise of sugar per the hundredweight during World War I, from \$5.50 in 1914 to \$22.50 in 1920, resulted in a "sudden and gigantic expansion of the economy" and was called "Dance of the Millions" (1995:325). Immediately following World War I, however, sugar prices declined in the 1930s, and Moya Pons argues that it is for this

²⁹ *El Faro a Colon*, 1952, *Ano III*, *Num. VI*, pp. 50-51.

reason that Trujillo “never thought of taking charge of the sugar industry before World War II” (1995:364). As Turits explains, “state discourse and policy had been at best ambivalent toward [the sugar industry], whose expansion ran counter to the regime’s nationalist-populist objectives” (2003:236-237).

Once sugar prices began to grow during a shortage of sugar immediately following World War II, Trujillo’s attention turned toward establishing himself as the preeminent sugar producer in the Dominican Republic. Mirroring the discourse that would be used regarding Trujillo’s nationalization of the country’s electricity system, Trujillo’s takeover of foreign-owned sugar enterprises was framed in nationalist terms. The acquisition of the interests of the West Indies Sugar Corporation, a United States company which owned 6 of 14 mills in the Dominican Republic, was hailed by the Dominican press as the “Dominicanization” of a foreign company that had “forgotten [its] obligations to the Dominican nation” (quoted in Turits 2003:237-240). Trujillo constructed his sugar empire using myriad tactics such as high taxes and arbitrarily but stringently enforced labor laws to oust foreign-owned companies³⁰. Trujillo’s efforts at turning “the Dominican state into a private business” (of which he would be the owner) lead to nationalization in industries other than sugar production (1995:375).

In January of 1955, amidst Trujillo’s “overall pattern of harassing and appropriating foreign interests in the 1950s,” the Compañía Electrica de Santo Domingo,

³⁰ “Despite the pressure the regime was asserting, the major U.S. sugar firms were still not persuaded to sell...In 1954 the Dominican government declared workers’ living quarters provided by U.S. sugar companies a menace to public health and ordered the construction of satisfactory dwellings...within sixty days...But on April 10, 1956 the government informed the company that because the new housing was still not complete at one of its mills, the Department of Health would suspend its sugar operations” (Turits 2003:239).

owned by the Central Public Utility Corporation in the United States, sold all of its assets and properties to the Dominican government for \$13,200,000³¹. The electricity sector of the Dominican Republic would remain under state ownership until 1999. Prior to purchasing the interests of the Central Public Utility Corporation, Trujillo had effectively politicized electricity by enacting a law in 1954 that required the president's permission "before electricity...could be stopped to users who were unable to pay their bills, as 'it is the duty of the State to take measures to protect its people...including those with the least resources'" (quoted in Turits 2003:240). Electricity was mobilized through nationalizing the means of its generation and distribution and employing a nationalist-populist discourse explaining the significance of its nationalization. Not unlike the woman Electricity who falls prey to the power and control of Thomas Edison, electricity served the interests of the Dominican state under Trujillo. A result of this is that electricity became a commodity whose service to Dominicans—especially those who were unable to afford it—became the obligation of the state.

"From the beginning," writes Frank Moya Pons, Trujillo's government was a regime of plunder organized to furnish him with total control of every economic enterprise existing in the country" (1995:359). In a few short years Trujillo had complete monopoly control of the production and sale of salt and rice and a near complete monopoly of the country's tobacco industry (1995:359-360). However, electricity would not be nationalized until 1955. In part this is because early in his regime the national electric grid was only in the process of disseminating. As the Dominican state budget

³¹ The New York Times, Jan. 18, 1955. Turits 2003:240, 341.47. In keeping with a trend that saw Trujillo acquiring foreign-interests for far less than their actual worth, the price of \$13, 200,000 was 28 percent below the estimated \$18 million value of the U.S. company's interests.

grew under Trujillo's control of the economy, "water, power, light, and telephone systems spread across the country" (2003:235). There is a second probable reason electricity was not nationalized until 1955. Richard Turits (2003) has shown that into the early 1950s Trujillo's grip on the Dominican Republic was firmly established not only via military and police force and state-ownership of a majority of industries, but via Trujillo's efforts at successfully crafting an 'alternative modernity' that defended the country's rural peasantry from sugar interests encroaching on peasants' agricultural land. Nationalization of the country's electricity system was at least in part a strategic decision made as Trujillo's personal sugar empire approached its most dramatic heights, the net effect of which was an increasingly alienated rural peasantry. And after Trujillo spent over \$30 million on the world fair in 1955, upsetting the country's balance of payments, his support began to wane in other sectors of the population as well (1995:373). Turits writes, "the expansion of sugar...reflected a 1950s regime characterized by growing arrogance, miscalculations, and illusions" (2003:246).

It is important to emphasize that with the electricity sector under state ownership and state coffers filled to the brim due to the nationalization of other sectors of the economy, Trujillo had the ability to align words and things and make his discourse surrounding electricity as a citizen's right a reality. His intentions in this regard were made clear by the promulgation of a 1954 electricity law mentioned above, but with the industry under his control it was his to develop and utilize as a political tool. A year after the sector's nationalization, Trujillo was making plans to lift the country's generating capacity from 61,500 to 159,000 kilowatts by constructing steam generating plants. This

hike in generating capacity would also benefit from the construction of an “atomic energy plant to supply a new industrial area and shipyard”³². But though Trujillo dressed his words in the rhetoric of nationalism and paternalism, the dictator had other plans for electricity that belied his desire for accumulating capital through unceasing economic expansion. In 1954 The New York Times reported a ‘new phase’ in tourism was beginning under Trujillo. At nearly the same moment as the nationalization of the electricity sector, the Dominican government was enacting a “new policy of ending government monopoly of tourist facilities to permit operation by private interests.” The redecoration and air conditioning of the rooms in The Jaragua, newly leased to “an experienced group of Miami Beach hotel men, exemplifies the dictator’s growing interest in tourism during the last six years of the regime³³.

When the plans to construct the Columbus Lighthouse are placed beside the political economic developments of the 1950s, which saw the Trujillo regime move “from a project of modernity based on political inclusion...of an economically independent peasantry to one based increasingly on the regime’s own large capitalist enterprises,” Trujillo’s motivation for nationalizing the country’s electricity industry appears more complex than being simply a political maneuver to garner support (2003:233). Nevertheless, Trujillo outwardly framed economic nationalization as a display of the state’s paternal benevolence. The lighthouse was not immune from this complex of motivation and rhetoric.

³² The New York Times, Aug. 17, 1956.

³³ The New York Times, April 11, 1954. This is not to say that Trujillo had not been attune up to 1954 to the potential of the Dominican Republic to become a Caribbean tourist hub. At the 1939 World’s Fair in New York, Ciudad Trujillo was marketed as a future “tourist destination and center of commerce” (Krohn-Hansen 2001:172).

Besides serving to connect symbolically the Dominican Republic to its Spanish-Catholic ‘discoverer’ Columbus, the memorial was imagined as something that would draw tourists from around the world, reflecting another of Trujillo’s plans to expand his personal enterprises in the country. In a New York Times article that appeared in 1953, the Columbus Memorial Lighthouse was touted as a “grandiose project” that will attract tourists to “Trujillo’s Island”³⁴. The article also mentioned, “several villages have been moved out to make room for [the lighthouse],” the euphemism ‘moved out’ concealing the forced relocation of some of Santo Domingo’s poorest citizens to other impoverished neighborhoods surrounding the *zona colonial*, the section of the capital with the most appeal to tourists seeking a glimpse of Santo Domingo’s Spanish colonial history. For that particular segment of the population of Santo Domingo, *El Faro a Colon* could have been little more than a reminder of their own poverty and insignificance in the eyes of the state, except perhaps at the level of rhetoric.

Largely due to a lack funding from countries that had originally promised to financially back project, construction plans for the lighthouse were put on hold. Nevertheless, the ambitious size and scope of the state’s plans for it in the late 1940s would be far surpassed as Trujillo began to consolidate his ‘sugar empire’ by nationalizing nearly every industry present in the Dominican Republic (statistic from Moya Pons?). Through the Columbus Lighthouse electricity was mobilized by the state in a symbolic display of the strength and modernity of the Dominican nation. Electricity

³⁴ The New York Times, April 12, 1953

had not yet been mobilized in terms of being a service to citizens for which the state would be responsible. In 1955 Ciudad Trujillo hosted The World Fair of Peace and Brotherhood, an extravagant state-funded commemoration that celebrating Trujillo's 25 years in power and epitomizing the ability of the Trujillo state to craft a 'magical modernity' (Derby 1998). The fair cost the state approximately \$30,000,000, a price that upset the balance of payments which Trujillo had made a central accomplishment during his regime (1995:373).

It is within the context of an alienated peasantry and urban poor population that Trujillo crafted the seizure of foreign-owned interests into a demonstration of paternal nationalism done for the good of the country. The nationalization of the electricity industry became an essential facet of this project, undertaken to shore up his regime in the eyes of Dominicans watching as *El Jefe's* personal wealth grew immensely in proportion to his sugar empire while their own interests slowly gave way to the accumulation of capital. Tourism became another potential source of capital that Trujillo planned to develop, and his regime identified electricity as essential to this industry's growth and the growth of the country's economy in general.

This chapter focused on how electricity was twice mobilized under the dictatorship of Rafael Trujillo serving to shape perceptions of his regime as supporting a nationalist-populist agenda. I used *El Faro a Colon* to demonstrate the changes taking place within his regime that would eventually undermine his rule amongst a large swath of the Dominican population. These changes were the turn toward the state's accumulation of capital and its undertaking of projects that did little more than demonstrate the degree

to which Dominicans were growing alienated from their ruler. As I show in the next section, under the authoritarian presidencies of Joaquin Balaguer (1966-1978, 1986-1996) electricity circulated within transforming economic and political circumstances—specifically, the growth of the tourist industry and free-trade manufacturing; the beginnings of a political orientation toward free market neoliberal economy—that set the groundwork for the political and economic shift supported by the election of Leonel Fernandez in 1996.

Section V - Electricity and Political Economy in the post-Trujillo Era

Before proceeding further I will summarize what I have shown thus far regarding the political economy of electricity in the Dominican Republic and electricity's position within the relationship between the Dominican state and its citizens. I showed how electricity moved from something that figured symbolically into discourses pertaining to the effects modernization and economic change in the Dominican Republic in the late 19th century to a commodity mobilized for political means under the dictatorship of Rafael Trujillo. Using as a starting point Lauren Derby's argument that gift giving by the Trujillo state was an essential factor in manufacturing consent for the dictator's rule, I showed how Trujillo presented nationalization of the country's electricity industry as a protectionist, patrimonial act of the state by which the regime intended to regain the consent of a population finding itself increasingly alienated by Trujillo's capitalist policies. By presenting electricity as a gift of the state in exchange for political consent

and allegiance, consumers increasingly perceived access to electricity service to be their right as Dominican citizens. With the electricity sector—operated by the Dominican Electric Company (CDE)—under the ownership of the Dominican state, it became a responsibility of the Dominican state to provide access to electricity for its citizens as part of the relationship constructed between the state and electricity consumers under Trujillo.

This section looks at the political and economic transformations and circumstances over the course of three decades, approximately from 1966 to 1996, that saw a decline under the presidencies of Joaquin Balaguer in the state's ability to utilize electricity as a mobilized commodity as was the situation under Trujillo. This section follows electricity into the post-Trujillo era and addresses how social, political, and economic transformations beginning in the 1970s—in combination with the political economic position of electricity established in the late years of Trujillo's rule—made it increasingly unfeasible for the state to maintain its grip on the production (and therefore on the cost paid by consumers) of electricity. At the end of this section the focus returns to the Columbus Memorial Lighthouse and how its completion under Balaguer in 1992, and Balaguer's decision to cancel the memorial's inauguration ceremony, demonstrates the last hurrah of electricity's position as a commodity mobilized by the state as a means of securing stability and popular acquiescence to the administration in power.

Joaquin Balaguer and The Political Economy of Electricity, 1966-1978

For a number of reasons demand for electricity among citizens, or residential consumers, grew throughout the post-Trujillo era. Given a strong boost by Trujillo's

policies of industrialization, urban populations began to increase dramatically in the post-Trujillo years and growing numbers of businesses and residents sought access to the grids of cities such as Santo Domingo, Santiago, and Barahona³⁵. Per capita electricity consumption also grew as personal electronics such as televisions and radios, as well as amenities such as air conditioning, became more common. For example, between 1965 and 1989, the number of televisions per 1,000 Dominicans grew from 13 to 82 (Hartlyn 1998:285). Neici Zeller has also pointed out that during Balaguer's first extended presidency, buildings constructed as public works by the government were designed to accommodate air conditioning, thereby adding another commodity to increasingly 'Americanized' Dominican consumption practices³⁶.

Under the ownership of the Dominican state, sugar continued to be an important and profitable export commodity contributing to Balaguer's ability to maintain a relatively tranquil economic front in the country despite the first indications of oil's steady climb upward in price per barrel after the first Organization of the Petroleum exporting Countries (OPEC) meeting in 1968. In the early 1970s the state under Balaguer faced a large surplus of funds for two reasons. First, between 1965 and 1973, the country received on average \$94 million per year from the United States, most "in the form of long-term low-interest loans for development programs" which mandated that the government build ports, highways, streets, and electricity plants (1995:397-400). Due to

³⁵ In 1960 60 percent of the Dominican population lived in rural areas in contrast to 84 percent in 1920 (1995:376). Estimations from 1990 found that 60.4 percent of the country's 7.2 million people lived in urban areas and in 1993 censuses found that approximately 30 percent of the total population lived in the National district area in and surrounding Santo Domingo (1998:137, country studies 2001:496).

³⁶ This point was brought to my attention in a conversation with Neici Zeller of the University of Illinois, Chicago.

foreign investment and public and private investment from domestic sources, in the early 1970s the Dominican Republic had one of the highest levels of growth in the Caribbean and Latin America; in total, between 1966 and 1971 approximately \$1 billion was invested in the Dominican economy, the majority of which came from the United States (1995:399). Second, Dominican-produced sugar was given a large import quota by the United States (700,000 tons in 1973, for example) in the years after Balaguer came to power until 1973. Coming in the wake of Trujillo's assassination and the civil war that followed in 1965, this quota system "cushioned the Dominican sugar industry against adverse fluctuations" in the market price of sugar, allowing "losses in the free market" to be "offset by gains under the quota" (1981:309).

Although Balaguer maintained a firm grip on the Dominican economy, private business was allowed access to the Dominican Republic to a degree that had been impossible under Trujillo. Balaguer continued to rule "in a patrimonial fashion, ensuring that he was the central axis around which all other major political and economic forces revolved," but he nevertheless promoted "the development of business groups separate from...the state" (2001:46). During the twelve years comprising Balaguer's first presidential regime sugar and tourist operations moved to the fore in government priorities and began receiving "substantial incentives." In the early 1970s foreign investment helped to make the country's economic growth one of the highest in Latin America and this trend has continued, with some interruption, to the present³⁷. Moya Pons explains that when concerns were raised regarding the amount of U.S. capital being

³⁷ U.S. Department of State country profile. <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/35639.htm>. The upward trajectory of foreign investment is illustrated by the fact that in 2004, United States foreign direct investment alone reached \$1 billion, an increase of \$184 million dollars from a year earlier (1995:400).

invested in the country, which some thought ought to be “limited...or expropriated,” Balaguer defended what he called the “geopolitical destiny” of the republic. “By this he meant that...the Dominican Republic would always be” the United State’s “satellite in the region” (1995:402).

After the assassination of Rafael Trujillo civil war erupted as political leaders and their parties attempted to consolidate in the aftermath of the dictatorship, looking for a way to seize power while maintaining a democratic front as the United States looked on³⁸. U.S. influence in the Dominican Republic, as we have seen above, extends to the late 19th century with the acquisition of the republic’s debt by the San Domingo Improvement Company. With the advent of the cold war in the years following World War II, and in response to the establishment of a communist state in Cuba, the U.S. maintained a tenuous relationship with the Trujillo regime, lending support to the regime until its transgressions in the late 1950s lead to sanctions by the Organization of American States and a subsequent drop in U.S. approval of Trujillo’s policies. Intending to prevent a communist takeover in the Dominican Republic after Trujillo’s assassination, the U.S. landed troops in Santo Domingo to quell political infighting and help reestablish political semblance, albeit with a leaning toward cooperation with U.S. policies in the Caribbean region. In this sense Balaguer’s acknowledgement of the ‘geopolitical destiny’ of the Dominican Republic fits in line with U.S. goals for the region in the cold war era.

With the electricity sector under government control and ownership it fell to the state to operate and supply electricity as demand for it grew amongst industry and the

³⁸ For a more thorough account than provided here of the 1965 civil war and U.S. occupation see Kryzanek and Wiarda (1988:41-48).

population. The electricity industry also benefited from these years of financial abundance. Although power outages did occur, electricity supply in the late 1960s and early 1970s saw substantial growth. In 1967, the CDE produced 618 kilowatt hours of electricity versus a sixty percent increase to 993 million in 1971 (Bell 1981:354). As mentioned briefly above, with the Dominican Electric Company under ownership of the state the government actively intervened in keeping the electric company afloat despite incurring financial losses. Beginning with the nationalization of the electricity industry in 1955 and into the 1960s and 70s under Balaguer, the government actively held down the price of electricity as against its market cost by subsidizing the CDE (1981:354). This contributed to the losses incurred by the CDE, which was paying more for electricity generation than it was receiving in payments for electricity sold to consumers. As Ian Bell points out, this benefited not only residential consumers who either paid prices below the actual cost of electricity or did not pay at all, but also benefited industry “as much as any other sector of the economy” (1981:354).

The Struggles of the Dominican Electric Company

These years of growth had stopped by the late 1970s. Investment in new plants slowed as the CDE—no longer able to rely on a corresponding increase in government subsidy—found itself without the means to invest in new plants and fully maintain the existing (Bell 1981:354). Little change came with the equally financially strapped administrations of Guzman and Blanco. Under Balaguer the CDE had difficulty meeting the country’s growing demand for electricity. This was in large part due to “plant

deterioration and from the [CDE's lack of] investment in new plants" (Bell 1981:354). In the late 1970s the CDE was "perennially in the red" mainly due to the Dominican government's policy of "holding the price of electricity down" as the cost of its generation grew (1981:354). One reason for the increasing cost of electricity in this period can be found in the rising cost of oil. Bell shows that in 1971 10.3 percent of the total amount of electricity generated by the CDE came from fuel oil generators.

By 1977 fuel oil generators accounted for 15 percent of electricity production (1981:354). As Fernando Coronil has shown, oil prices began their precipitous rise in the late 1960s due to actions taken by OPEC as a result of the third and fourth Arab-Israeli wars of 1967 and 1973 (Coronil 1997:56)³⁹. Rising oil costs reverberated through out the Dominican economy. In the late 1970s fluctuations in the market price of oil thus had an effect on electricity production as the state was forced repeatedly to bail out the CDE as it struggled to supply consumers. During the last years of Balaguer's three-term presidency, beginning in 1976 oil prices increased dramatically leading to a tenfold increase in the Dominican Republic's petroleum import bill. At the same time sugar prices which had been substantially high enough in the late 1960s and early 70s to "offset oil price increases" were dropping in price along side other Dominican exports such as tobacco (2001:145).

As demand for electricity grew it became increasingly difficult for the Dominican government, as the owner of the means of electricity generation and production, to supply

³⁹ Coronil writes that the abilities of OPEC to set the market price of oil, resulting from a shift "from a rent the level of which was determined by the market price to a market price determined by the level of rent," enabled OPEC to use oil "as a political weapon" in its dealings with Western countries such as the U.S. (1997:56).

electricity to citizens at subsidized prices. As we have seen, the Dominican state under Trujillo intervened in electricity production by nationalizing the country's electricity industry, effectively mobilizing electricity to shore up political support amongst the populace. However, as the cost of oil increased and sugar profits decreased in the late 1970s, the Dominican state under Balaguer could not maintain control of the country's electorate in the face of democratic elections; in a sense, the gifting relationship between the Dominican state and citizens that began under Trujillo could no longer be upheld due to a number of economic issues, as I have shown above.

The country's growing tourist industry, built upon hotels and resorts catering to patrons who expected the luxury of air conditioning and functioning electrical outlets for televisions and other electronic items, should have helped the CDE's financial situation by plugging into the national grid. As an increasingly vibrant sector of the national economy, hotels and resorts would have been able to contribute regular payments to the CDE. This also applied to the country's growing export-manufacturing sector, which depended as well on electricity to run manufacturing and assembly machinery. However, with the CDE unable to provide consistent electricity supply, many hotels, resorts, and free trade zones began to rely on private generators to whom payment did not benefit the CDE. According to the Inter-American Development Bank, by 1989 approximately half of the country's electricity supply was provided by privately-owned small-scale generating facilities; Hartlyn explains, "this represented the most inefficient de facto form of privatization imaginable, leading to further foreign-exchange expenditures—both for

the oil to run the generators and the machines themselves, which were more inefficient than an effective national power grid could tolerate” (Hartlyn 1998:326).

Balaguer’s regime operated in a patrimonial-authoritarian fashion that was in many regards a continuation of Trujillo’s policies, but when it became apparent after the 1978 elections that Balaguer might try to upset the elections, the administration of Jimmy Carter in the United States and a number of Latin American and European groups leant “firm opposition” to any interference by Balaguer (2001:47). Two democratically elected presidents served terms from 1978 to 1986 (S. Antonio Guzman from 1978-1982 and Salvador Jorge Blanco from 1982-1986) and during this span of eight years several important political developments occurred regarding the government’s role in the national economy, which I address below. And while these developments would have lasting ramifications, this period of eight years would ultimately be a short break from Balaguer’s political rule; in 1986 Balaguer was reelected and would spend another ten uninterrupted years as president.

1978-1986: The Years Between Balaguer

With the election of Jorge Blanco in 1982, the Dominican Republic entered into its first dealings with the International Monetary Fund (IMF), but even when the government agreed to transfer payments for imported goods to the free-market exchange rate, privatizing the CDE was not presented as an option. This enabled the government to

protect the price of electricity from fluctuations in the market price of electricity⁴⁰.

Petroleum was also withheld from deregulation of the price of imported goods. And while the political economic history of oil in the Dominican Republic would make as interesting a study as this, there is no room for it here. That said, electricity continued to function throughout the administrations of Antonio Guzman and Jorge Blanco, though in a diminished fashion, as part of the Dominican state's patrimonial approach to goods and the economy⁴¹.

For reasons addressed above, until the last years of Balaguer's first three consecutive administrations the republic saw economic stability and relative prosperity in the state coffers. With the end of the generous United States sugar quota, a general decline in the market price of sugar, and the rise in oil prices in the late 1970s, the Dominican government found its balance of payments for the national debt returning to the red. Prior to his inauguration in 1982, Jorge Blanco sought contacts with the IMF for financial assistance and a program of financial stabilization (Hartlyn 1998:174-175). Hartlyn writes that at that point "there were few realistic options for the country other than negotiating with the IMF." Despite large-scale riots that were violently subdued by Dominican armed forces (see footnote 40), between 1985 and 1986 the government successfully complied with an IMF stand-by program (Metz 2001:49). Nevertheless, as Hartlyn has argued, the culminating effect of Blanco's engagement with the IMF was

⁴⁰ Exposure of the electricity industry to even a modicum of deregulation, as happened in the mid-1990s when the government signed an agreement with independent power producers lead to significantly raised electricity prices (World Bank Report No. 31741-DO, 8)

⁴¹ Despite the precautionary decision to exclude petroleum from price deregulation, the subsequent rise in the price of imported foodstuffs was enough to cause popular unrest culminating in the "IMF riots" of April 1984 (see, Hartlyn 1998:179).

ultimately the reelection of Joaquin Balaguer in 1986. Balaguer made electoral promises pertaining to privatizing and stabilizing the national economy—of which the electricity industry was of course a part—though without reliance upon the IMF. Upon election “Balaguer abandoned all his electoral promises...and ran the country against all free-market principles” (1995:427).

According to Frank Moya Pons, Balaguer decided upon his reelection in 1986 that he would stay in power until his death (1995:423). The policy guiding his presidency was to resuscitate the Dominican economy without relying upon IMF assistance as Jorge Blanco had done. Balaguer ran the country as an economic dictatorship and planned to boost the economy through “dramatic increases in public investment, especially in construction and public works” (Hartlyn 1998:193). Balaguer planned to commemorate the 500th anniversary of Christopher Columbus’s discovery of ‘the New World’ in 1992 by completing El Faro a Colon, the project whose foundations were laid in 1948 during Trujillo’s rule. As was the plan in 1948, the Columbus Lighthouse would project beams of light thousands of feet into the air making the shape of a cross in the sky. As Balaguer prepared to use light and electricity to commemorate Columbus, the CDE—which Balaguer had declared under his personal control at the start of his term in 1986—was suffering its most severe setbacks, resulting in daily, multiple hour-long power outages. By 1989, the third year of Balaguer’s term, “no person, household or business [plugged into the national grid] could receive more than three hours of electricity per day” (1995:431). Despite such extreme set backs Balaguer decided to push on with his plan for the lighthouse.

A Gift No longer: Balaguer and The Columbus Memorial Lighthouse

Balaguer's decision to complete the lighthouse and turn its inauguration ceremony into an international spectacle by inviting the Pope and other foreign dignitaries demonstrated with clarity that under Balaguer something had gone awry with the patrimonial state (Krohn-Hansen 2001:166). Under Trujillo, state-sponsored spectacles such as the World Fair of Peace and Brotherhood, as well as the aborted effort to construct El Faro a Colon, were acceptable because it was clear to citizens that they still commanded a certain amount of focus from the regime in power. In 1992 this was not the case. It was apparent that Balaguer was more concerned with projecting outward symbols of national strength and historical pride than with the actual concerns of Dominican citizens. Krohn-Hansen (2001) has analyzed the completion of the Columbus Lighthouse in terms of 'political cosmologies,' pointing to the history of racial exclusion in the Dominican Republic, primarily regarding Haitians and darker-skinned Dominicans, and this history's relationship to Columbus and his European heritage. Krohn-Hansen does not, however, address the degree to which the state was or was not successful in using the Columbus Lighthouse to construct such a racially exclusive political cosmology. As will become clear, completion of the lighthouse was far from acceptable for many Dominicans, not because of what it represented in terms of political constructions of Dominican race and history (though in some respects this was indeed the case) but because of what the lighthouse demonstrated to Dominicans regarding their strained relationship to the Dominican state.

Michel-Rolph Trouillot, writing about the 1992 commemorations in Europe, the Caribbean, and the United States for the quincentennial of Columbus's landing in the New World, explains, "commemorations sanitize...the messy history lived by actors [and] contribute to the continuous myth-making process that gives history its more definite shapes: they help to create, modify, or sanction the public meanings attached to historical events deemed worthy of mass celebration" (Trouillot 1995:116). To some degree it is assumed here that state-sponsored commemorations—constructions of a specific perspective of a national history, in this case via the Columbus Lighthouse in the Dominican Republic—are unequivocally accepted by citizens who buy into the historical reading performed by the state via the commemoration. The degree to which a public commemoration such as the Columbus Lighthouse is accepted or rejected by citizens reveals not only citizens' agency to ascribe or not ascribe to the state's reading of history, but also has the potential to reveal tensions in the very relationship of the state to its citizens.

In late September, 1992, Balaguer cancelled the inauguration of the Columbus Memorial Lighthouse, scheduled for the first week of October to commemorate the 500th anniversary of Columbus's landing in the New World. Though violent protests had been taking place during the previous week in response to the murder of a human rights organizer by the Dominican police, protests had become increasingly frequent beginning in the late 1980s. With the Pope planning a five-day visit for the inauguration, the government wanted to minimize social protests and demonstrations. The protests that lead Balaguer to cancel the inauguration of the Columbus Lighthouse were part of a trend

in the late 1980s of growing social unrest in different sections of the Dominican population in response to the policies of the Balaguer administration. Since the late 1985 "urban, territorially based social movements" had been on the rise (Hartlyn 1998:198). Hartlyn points to "economic crisis" and a "growing disillusionment with [Balaguer's party, the PRD] and...politics in general" (198). Hartlyn adds that problematic electricity supply was also an important factor in the cause of growing discontent in urban areas. That the government planned to inaugurate a gigantic lighthouse while electricity supply was dropping to as little as three hours a day did not escape people's attention. As the New York Times reported, the lighthouse became "a lightning rod for critics and a source of trouble like few others" in Balaguer's career⁴². The article continues:

"[That] the country's electricity supply is notoriously unreliable...only adds to the sense of bitterness many say they feel about a lighthouse whose 30 billion-candlepower lights are said to be able to produce a cross-shaped beam...visible as far away as Puerto Rico."

The inauguration of the Columbus Lighthouse took place on October 6, 1992, though the ceremony was significantly reduced in size. "There will be a simple ceremony of laying flowers at the monument, and that is all," said Peter Morales Troncoso, the director of the Dominican Permanent Commission for the Celebration of the Fifth Centennial⁴³.

That the Balaguer administration cancelled canceled the initial plans for the lighthouse's inauguration is demonstrative of both the widespread disagreement that

⁴² *The New York Times*, September 25, 1992.

⁴³ *The New York Times*, September 25, 1992.

existed amongst Dominicans regarding the state's interpretation of Columbus's role in Dominican history and the shaping of Dominican identity, and of the dissatisfaction Dominican citizens felt toward the policies of the Balaguer administration. The contradictions inherent in a state-sponsored celebration that made extensive use of electric lighting while recurring power outages characterized everyday life for a wide swath of the population was intolerable. Balaguer would remain in power until 1996 when Leonel Fernandez and his plans for economic and political modernization gained the support of the Dominican electorate. Thus the cancellation and subsequent downsizing of the Columbus Lighthouse inauguration ceremony symbolized the impending end of the patrimonial state in the Dominican Republic, and at the bottom of this transformation lay electricity.

In this section I looked at electricity in the post-Trujillo era and how a confluence of factors, from rising oil prices and declining sugar prices to the lack of upkeep of state-owned generating plants, made it increasingly difficult for the Dominican state to utilize electricity as a mobilized commodity as it had been in the later years of Trujillo's regime. I pointed to the protests surrounding the inauguration of the Columbus Memorial Lighthouse as indicative of the end of the patrimonial state in the Dominican Republic. The consumption of electricity by the lighthouse, a state-sponsored construction, despite substantially diminished electricity supply for citizens showed Dominicans that the sort of alignment between state and citizen fostered by Trujillo and carried over into the first Balaguer administration no longer existed.

Conclusion

In this paper I used electricity in its commodity form as a lens through which I viewed the history of relations between the Dominican state and citizens during the 20th century. I left off in the years immediately preceding the 1996 presidential election of Leonel Fernandez. This paper sought to offer a novel approach to analyzing the political and economic shift that occurred at the state level under Fernandez. After over a half-century of state control of the national economy, Fernandez's election brought widespread privatization and an embrace by the Dominican state of neoliberal economic policy.

At the end of the 19th century, as large-scale agriculture and the modernizing tendencies of Ulises Heureaux propelled forward a transformation of the Dominican landscape, electricity was both a tangible sign of 'progress' through modernization and a reminder of the costs to sovereignty and independence that such progress could, and eventually would, entail for the nation. Because electricity is a commodity that circulates through the every day lives of consumers, control of its production and transmission served the political designs of the state under the dictatorship of Rafael Trujillo. With Trujillo's decision to nationalize the country's electricity industry, electricity became a gift whose exchange for political consent amongst citizens would make it a significant commodity aspect of the relationship between citizens and the Dominican state.

With its production and transmission the responsibility of the state, the administrations of Joaquin Balaguer found electricity supply to be increasingly a point of

contention in state-citizen relations. Sugar no longer brought the revenue it did under Trujillo and during the early years of Balaguer's first administration and the state's grip on the national economy had slowly weakened since the dictator's assassination. It therefore became difficult for the state-owned Dominican Electric Company (CDE) to provide electricity as demand for its service grew yearly. Still, privatization was not considered during Balaguer's tenure. Balaguer was aware of the value of keeping electricity under state control, which enabled the state to absorb losses incurred by the CDE as it continued to offer electricity to Dominicans at prices below the market cost. This relationship became untenable as losses from the CDE began to deprive the state of detrimental amounts of money.

As a commodity, electricity will continue to provide an interesting analytical lens with which to focus on the intersection of state politics, the everyday lives of citizens, and the role of economics—both micro and macro—on the dynamics of this relationship. My research was limited as an undergraduate at the University of Michigan by time constraints and the inaccessibility of certain materials that could be accessed only in the Dominican Republic. I believe that service commodities such as electricity offer a valuable way of looking at nation-states and the citizens who lay at their heart. As I hope has become clear, the theoretical approach of cultural anthropology has much to offer disciplines such as political science and economics, both of which, if I may be permitted a broad generalization, appear to be lacking the human aspect of their respective intellectual foci. It is humans who live within and comprise the systems, markets, and

societies that are studied, and behind each question it should be remembered that the answer always involves some number of living, breathing individuals.

Bibliography

- Appadurai, Arjun. Introduction: commodities and the politics of value. In *The Social Life of Things*, 3-63. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986.
- Baud, Michiel. *The Origins of Capitalist Agriculture in the Dominican Republic*. Latin American Research Review, Vol. 22, No. 2 (1987), 135-153.
- Bell, Ian. *The Dominican Republic*. Boulder: Westview Press, 1981.
- Calder, Bruce. *Impact of Intervention*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1984.
- Coronil, Fernando. *The Magical State: Nature, Money, and Modernity in Venezuela*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997.
- Derby, Lauren. *Hatians, Magic, and Money: Raza and Society in the Hatian Dominican Borderlands, 1900-1937*.
- Derby, Lauren. *The Magic of Modernity: Dictatorship and Civic Culture in the Dominican Republic, 1916-1962*. PhD Dissertation, University of Chicago, 1998
- El Faro a Colon*, 1952, Ano III, Num. VI
- Hartlyn, Jonathon. *The Struggle for Democratic Politics in the Dominican Republic*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1998.
- Hoetink, H. *The Dominican People 1850-1900*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982.
- Hughes, Thomas P. *Networks of Power*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1983.
- Krohn-Hansen, Christian. *A tomb for Columbus in Santo Domingo. Political cosmology, population, and racial frontiers*. Social Anthropology (Cambridge), Vol. 9, No. 2, 2001, 165-192.
- Lutz, Catherine and Donald Nonini. *The Economies of Violence and the Violence of*

- Economies in Anthropological Theory Today*, Henrietta L. Moore, ed. Polity Press, 1999.
- Martinez-Vergne, Teresita. *Nation & Citizen in the Dominican Republic, 1880-1916*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2005.
- Maya Pons, Frank. *Dominican Republic in Latin American Urbanization: Historical Profiles of Major Cities*. Westport: Greenwood Press, 1994.
- Maya Pons, Frank. *The Dominican Republic: A National History*. Princeton: Markus Wiener Publishers, 1995.
- Metz, Helen Chapin, ed. *Dominican Republic and Haiti, country studies*. Federal Research Division, Library of Congress, 2001.
- Ortiz, Fernando. *Cuban Counterpoint*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2001.
- Pattullo, Polly. *Last Resorts: The Cost of Tourism in the Caribbean*. London: Cassell, 1996.
- Turits, Richard Lee. *Foundations of Despotism: Peasants, the Trujillo Regime, and Modernity in Dominican History*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003.
- Trouillot, Michel-Rolph. *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1995

Articles

- The New York Times, April 12, 1953
- The New York Times, Jan. 6, 1954
- The New York Times, April 11, 1954
- The New York Times, Jan. 18, 1955
- The New York Times, Aug. 17, 1956.
- The New York Times, September 25, 1992.
- “Correspondencia del exterior,” *El Eco de la Opinion* 683 (July 9, 1892).

