

Race and the Social Order of Trinidad and Tobago in the 21st century: An Introduction

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Studies of the structure of the social order of Trinidad and Tobago (T&T) is a glaring omission in the post-independence academic literature on T&T. Much has been devoted to studying the nexus between race and politics in T&T but there is no academic work in the public domain that analyses the structure of the social order to reveal the nature of power and power relations in the social order. The hegemonic position in the academic literature is that the two majority black races dominate the politics of T&T and by extension the state apparatus therefore the group controlling the state wields hegemonic power¹. But a journey through the terrain of politics and power teaches that power relations in T&T are much more complex than this simplistic rubric as the transfixing issue with politicians is winning elections repeatedly and in order to win elections sustainably you need to perform in office and to finance elaborately expensive election campaigns. The elites who wield economic power are then of crucial importance to political sustainability as they are financiers and more importantly the persons necessary to enable political regimes to deliver thereby reaping votes in return. This crucially strategic role afforded the elites by the politicians of T&T demands that the structure of the social order of T&T be articulated to identify the nature of these elites and the power relations of the social order be deconstructed to expose the dynamic of the social order. This process will expose to scrutiny realities of the social order of T&T that impact the sustainability of the social order in conjunction with threats that arise external of the social order. This is but an introduction to the process that seeks to complete a task that is vital to understanding the evolution of the social order but widely evaded for fear of the impact on employment, career, access to mainstream society and the dispensing of largesse. This fear is the most potent indicator that the structure of the social order of T&T in the 21st century raises more questions than answers to the independence project that commenced on the 31st August 1962!

The 2011 census of the population of T&T reported that the population was 1,328,019 persons comprised as follows: East Indians 35.4%, Africans 34.2%, Mixed 22.8%, All other 1.4% and Not stated 6.2%. The All other segment comprises: White 0.59%, Chinese 0.30%, Syrian/Lebanese 0.08%, Portuguese 0.06%, Indigenous 0.11% and Other Ethnic group 0.17%. The first question that arises based on the reality of Jamaica and Barbados (see

<http://www.daurius.com/caribbean-social-order>) is if the majority races are represented in the private sector of the economy in a manner that reflects their dominant position in the demography of the population of T&T? The second question that follows naturally is if the minority races are overrepresented in the private sector in a manner that is not in keeping with the demography of T&T? Answers to both questions are crucial to the future of a sustainable democracy in T&T.

The major problem in this exercise is the availability of the necessary data in the public domain which is even more pressing given my financial and other limitations. But the study has to be done with what is available in the public domain as attempts to fill the void is necessary for in a democracy of the 21st century wherever power is wielded in the social order must be understood by all and exposed to the democratic floodlights for all to view. The Sunday Express October 16, 2016 in an article titled "More poor people in T&T" reported on the findings of a 2014 study on poverty that is not in the public domain. Article reported that for the period studied there were more than 300,000 persons living on TT\$ 985 or less per month in T&T. The poverty rate increased from 16.6% in 2005 to 24.5% in 2014 with indigence rising from 1.2% in 2005 to 5.6% in 2014 in Trinidad and from 0% in 2005 to 4.6% in Tobago. The poverty rate by racial groups in 2014 was as follows: Africans 37.1% indigent, 39.4% poor but not indigent and 37.3% vulnerable but not poor. Indians 25.2% indigent, 30.6% poor but not indigent and 32.1% not vulnerable but not poor. Mixed race 37.4% indigent, 27.9% poor but not indigent and 28% vulnerable but not poor. The article reports that there was no probability of Whites and Syrian/Lebanese being indigent and the structural inequality of the race groups in the social order. The sample consisted of 5,946 households which comprised 1.4% of the population of Trinidad and 7.4% of the population in Tobago which overrepresented the population of Tobago in the sample. The actual samples of individuals by race were not presented in the article hence the representativeness of the sample of the race composition of the population of T&T is not known at the time of writing especially important because of the size of sample drawn from Tobago with the subsequent risk of overrepresentation of Africans in the sample. The picture painted by what is in the article consists of an African population where 76.5% of the sample are either indigent or poor, a mixed race population where 65.3% of

the sample are either indigent or poor, an Indian population where 55.8% of the sample are either indigent or poor whilst Whites and Syrian/Lebanese of the sample had no chance of being indigent. What are then the social forces that have exempted Whites and Syrian/Lebanese from being indigent but have placed the burden of indigence on the non-white, non-Arab majority races of T&T? Clearly in this case political dominance of the state since independence has not worked to the benefit of the majority races especially the African race as the minority races have benefited appreciably from independence compared to the majority races even though they are not in positions of dominant political power nor do they command the necessary population size to impact the outcome of an election in a single electoral district much less a constituency. Political domination is then an illusion as it has not addressed the inequality inherited from the colonial social order at formal independence by the majority races. There is also a reality to be deconstructed in the hierarchy of race inequality revealed by the article as the majority Indian race has less members of the sample being indigent and poor and the difference is appreciable which demands complex explanations. What is clear from the newspaper article is the reality that there is an underclass in T&T in the 21st century that is growing in size and evolving demanding ongoing research to determine the composition of this underclass and the interaction of this underclass with the state and the other groups of the social order.

The next stage is utilising the data in the public domain to complete an analysis of the occupational structure of the race groups of the social order and to identify and analyse the nature and structure of ownership of the dominant enterprises of the private sector of T&T. Combined these analyses will enable an explanation of the nature of the power relations of race relations of the social order and the nexus between race and power in the social order.

Notes

1. Selwyn Ryan (1991) "Social Stratification in Trinidad and Tobago Lloyd Braithwaite revisited" in "Social and Occupational Stratification in contemporary Trinidad and Tobago" Selwyn Ryan Editor Trinidad ISER