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Haitian Reserve Army of Labor:
A Product of Geopolitical, Endemic, and Phenomenological Violence

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Abstract

Haiti has endured both natural and man-made violence since colonization, shaping its population into a global reserve army of labor for the world-system. This paper examines how historical and structural factors, including colonialism, political instability, and economic exploitation, have contributed to the creation of a vulnerable population appropriable as a cheap labor force. It explores how these factors, compounded by phenomenological violence—the internalization of oppression and fear—have led to widespread migration, positioning Haitians as a global reserve army of labor, particularly in industries like sugarcane production in the Dominican Republic. Through this lens, the paper highlights how migration, fueled by both environmental and systemic violence, has entrenched Haitians in labor markets worldwide.

Keywords: Haiti, Violence, Migration, Reserve Army of Labor, Capitalism, World-System, Colonialism

Haiti's history is profoundly marked by violence that is structural, phenomenological, and endemic (Dery and Molinero-Gerbeau 2024). This violence has not only perpetuated persistent poverty but has also driven various social phenomena, notably the migration of Haitians to nearly every continent (United Nations 2023). Although Haitian migration patterns and destinations are diverse (Augustin 2018), the Dominican Republic—and in particular, its sugar sector—emerges as one of the most significant destinations for this labor force (Audebert 2011). Haitians have historically constituted a cheap and indispensable workforce, facilitating the accumulation of surplus value wherever they have settled. The global sugar industry provides a salient example of how their availability has become fundamental to the functioning of sectors pivotal to global capitalism (Moore 2015a).

The relationship between structural violence, labor migration, and the integration of peripheral states such as Haiti into the global capitalist system has been the subject of considerable scholarly attention. Scholars, including Audebert (2011) and Augustin (2018), have analyzed Haitian migration patterns, focusing particularly on the Dominican Republic as a principal destination. These works offer valuable insights into the heterogeneity of Haitian migration flows and the socio-economic conditions driving mobility. Similarly, Moore (2015a) has shown how global industries—notably sugar—structurally depend on cheap labor from historically marginalized populations, providing a world-ecological perspective on labor exploitation under capitalism. In parallel, the United Nations (2023) has underscored how endemic violence contributes to poverty and displacement, framing migration as both a symptom and a consequence of persistent structural inequalities.

Despite this robust body of literature, critical gaps remain insufficiently addressed. While scholars acknowledge Haitian migration's historical roots and structural drivers, there is limited focused analysis on how systemic and historically constructed violence has explicitly and deliberately served the world-system. This paper argues that these factors have produced a global Reserve Army of Labor that sustains global industries such as sugar production long term. Furthermore, little integrative work has been conducted combining Marx's theory of the Reserve Army of Labor with the specific historical trajectories of Haitian violence—both structural and phenomenological—to explain how Haiti's labor force has been continually rendered vulnerable and exploitable within the world-system's division of labor.

This article contends that Haiti was integrated into the capitalist world-system not only as a supplier of raw materials, but also as a reservoir of labor instrumental in the accumulation of wealth by global powers that have directly and indirectly dominated the country. The endemic and phenomenological violence that has shaped Haitian society plays a central role in maintaining the island's subaltern status, thereby ensuring its continued position within the global economic order. Born into violence, Haitian subjects—confronted with a persistent lack of alternatives—are rendered cheap and disposable workers whose labor remains crucial to sustaining industries such as sugar on an international scale.

This paper seeks to explicitly theorize the Haitian labor force as a historically constructed global Reserve Army of Labor, shaped and maintained through centuries of violence. This

approach bridges the theoretical framework of Marxist political economy with a historical analysis of Haitian violence, offering an interdisciplinary contribution that has been largely absent from both migration studies and global labor history. To undertake this historiographical work, secondary sources tracing Haiti's history from the colonial period to the present day have been reviewed, with particular emphasis on the various forms of violence that have shaped Haitian society and their consequences for the future of its population within the global division of labor.

The article proceeds as follows: the first section will examine the theory of the Reserve Army of Labor. The second section will explore the historical and structural violence in Haiti. The third section will analyze the structural factors that shape the Haitian Reserve Army of Labor. The paper concludes with a synthesis of key findings and considerations for future scholarship.

Future researchers will be encouraged to conduct empirical studies quantitatively, measuring the flows and economic impacts of Haitian labor in global industries beyond sugar; explore comparative cases where similar patterns of labor force construction through violence are observable in other peripheral regions; and investigate how contemporary transformations—including neoliberal economic shifts, climate change, and evolving migration policies—may be reshaping the dynamics of this Reserve Army in ways not yet fully theorized.

Global Reserve Army of Labor

Despite the inseparable link that the Reserve Army of Labor (from here, RAL) concept has with Marxist theory it is a pre-Marxist notion promoted by the British workers' movement, which Karl Marx incorporated into his theory (Marx 1867; Denning 2010). Although it has become more complex and extended over time, it can initially be summarized as the population layer, which, in the capitalist system, does not own the means of production (capital) and is therefore obliged to sell its labor power. Its availability on the labor market—whether or not workers have a job—characterizes this large group. In the hegemonic language of the world of statistics, it is today considered to be "active workers" (Marx 1867; Harvey 2005; Standing 2011).

An early and explicit conceptualization of a phenomenon akin to the RAL can be traced back to classical political economists prior to Marx. For example, Thomas Malthus (1798) highlighted the idea of a surplus population, positing that population growth tends to outstrip food production, which creates a pool of destitute laborers. Similarly, David Ricardo (1817), in his theory of value, underscored the significance of a subsistence wage, implicitly recognizing the existence of a structurally unemployed class that functions to keep wages low. These pre-Marxist theories framed surplus labor not in terms of class struggle but as inevitable demographic and economic phenomena.

The subtlety that the Reserve Army metaphor brings to the simple description of active labor is the inability of those who belong to it to impact the relationship between supply and demand in the labor market (Grover 2003). Thus, their bargaining power over their working conditions is

minimal; because there is a surplus of workers in relation to capital's real labor needs, the latter is in a position to "extend...massively the exploitation of labor through measures of the production of absolute surplus value, which is through lower wages, longer working hours, and an intensification of labor through piecework, etc." (Kaarsholm 2020: 6). Two essential characteristics of the Reserve Army are its large size, which makes workers replaceable, and its usefulness: "the effectiveness of the Reserve Army is not just linked to its size. To be competitive, individuals must also have characteristics that capital desires" (Grover 2003: 20). Consequently, the Reserve Army should not be interpreted simply as a pool of unskilled workers but as the entire workforce that the system can appropriate on the cheap (Moore 2015a).

Two structural functions characterize this collective: availability and replaceability. The first is linked to capitalism's need to be able to immediately recruit, at the lowest cost, the workers the productive system needs without slowing down the accumulation process. The second is linked to the docility and discipline of the workforce. If there are more workers than demand (what is commonly considered structural or residual unemployment), then workers' ability to exert pressure on wages and working conditions is reduced, since at the slightest protest, others can quickly replace them (Moore 2015b).

Building on these early insights, Marx (1867) elaborated the concept of the RAL with greater theoretical precision. In Capital, he identified three components of the relative surplus population: the floating, latent, and stagnant segments. The floating segment includes temporarily unemployed industrial workers, the latent segment corresponds to surplus rural labor that can be drawn into industry, and the stagnant segment comprises those trapped in irregular, underpaid work. This typology reveals how capital structurally produces and reproduces surplus labor to discipline the workforce and intensify exploitation.

Based on these characteristics, the RAL has been analyzed from various perspectives differing in the field of work and has evolved depending on the author and on the scope of the context analyzed. Marx, for example, spoke mainly from the industrial perspective, focusing on the Industrial Reserve Army and revealing the system's tendency to try to depend less on variable capital (labor) and amplify constant capital (machinery), thereby amplifying the Industrial Reserve Army and reducing its cost. In the words of Xie, Kuang, and Li (2018: 2), "Marx's theory reveals that capital accumulation will keep increasing the organic composition of capital, and the relative proportion of variable capital will decline, resulting in the emergence of the relative surplus population, namely the RAL." Indeed, the RAL as a necessary and permanent element of capitalism is not a temporary or accidental phenomenon, but rather, one that constantly recurs due to the inherent dynamics of capitalism (Marx 1867).

Outside the Marxist framework, other authors have enriched the RAL theory, even without using the term. For example, Ricardo (1817) in his theory of value, discussed the centrality of the

subsistence wage and the structural function of unemployment. Keynes (1936) analyzed the relationship between supply and demand for labor in the labor market, showing how unemployment, even if pursued by the system, also works against it. He revealed that an excessively large RAL reduces the economic dynamism of consumer societies. Marcuse (1964), following in Keynes' footsteps, also examined the social and political implications of unemployment. He argued that unemployment is deliberately created by capital to weaken the working class, driving down wages and boosting the competitiveness of the capitalist system. This is partly due to the difficulty of reducing production costs from constant capital, which limits the scope for lowering variable capital. Layard (1997: 190) points to the importance of the creation of the RAL as a mechanism for controlling labor costs: "In any economy there has to be some short-term unemployment to ease mobility and restrain wage pressure by providing employers with a pool of workers able to fill vacancies" and thus the employees remain under control.

More recently, authors such as Standing (2011) have developed perspectives adapted to contemporary logic. Standing became particularly influential through his notion of the "precariat class," which shares similarities with the RAL theory. He argued that the decline of trade union power and increasingly neoliberal legislation have created a new layer within the RAL. Even when workers earn a wage, the prevalence of precarious working conditions renders them itinerant and replaceable. Uninsured wages and fixed-term contracts make the availability of labor for the labor market more flexible while generating economic insecurity and day-to-day stress that have significant repercussions on workers' physical and mental health.

Gender also plays a decisive role in shaping the RAL. Federici (2012) addressed this issue by examining the sexual division of labor and demonstrating the patriarchal nature of the capitalist system, which creates a specific RAL of women, locating their position in certain segments—notably linked to social reproduction and care—often without remuneration. Indeed,

> the origin of the differences in power between women and men was thus related to the exclusion of women from capitalist development. Such a position obliged us once again to explain the perennitý of sexism in capitalist relations through cultural dispositions (Federici 2014: 13–14).

In fact, world-systems theory, particularly Wallerstein (1983), expands Marx's national-centric perspective by framing the RAL within a global capitalist system. It highlights how peripheral countries act as variable capital suppliers, which is not only related to raw materials but also to labor by disposing of a reserve labor pool for core economies, which, in the form of migration, perpetuate uneven development and dependency. This global RAL serves the same disciplinary and cost-reduction functions at an international scale.

On one hand, incorporating theories of violence further sharpens our understanding of how populations are rendered part of the RAL. Galtung's (1969) theory of structural violence shows how economic and social systems systematically harm marginalized populations by preventing them from meeting basic needs, thus producing vulnerable, expendable labor. Similarly, Žižek (2008) differentiates between subjective violence (direct, visible) and objective/systemic violence (embedded in social structures), which parallels how the RAL is invizibilized but perpetually reproduced.

On the other hand, theories of dispossession, such as Marx's (1867) primitive accumulation, David Harvey's (2005) accumulation by dispossession, or Bin and Mondal's (2020) logic of dispossession, reveal how displacement, expropriation, and depeasantization historically and contemporarily create surplus labor pools. These mechanisms are critical to understanding how migration, land grabs, austerity policies, and neoliberal reforms continually manufacture the global RAL, reinforcing core-periphery divisions along the world-system.

In conclusion, the RAL refers to the system's structural need for an abundant, flexible workforce to be integrated into the productive system at low cost, thus guaranteeing the continuity of accumulation processes. However, as it has been defined, this perspective has commonly tended to have a national orientation, given the influence of states in determining the conditions that make it possible. Particularly since the 1970s, following the rise of neoliberalism, several authors, including Hymer (1979), have begun to approach the Reserve Army from a transnational perspective, speaking of a global RAL. In a world-system where economic frontiers are progressively abolished, and the free market incorporates more and more territories, the growing overpopulation of peripheral countries has been understood as a new frontier for the appropriation of cheap labor. The global momentum of South-North migration, whether autonomous (through migrants' own decisions) or deliberately activated (through mechanisms such as guest worker programs), has injected the economies of the core with a new RAL, indispensable for sustaining outsourced economies. Moreover, since the 1990s, the collapse of the Soviet bloc has opened the doors of almost the entire globe to the labor force required by the capitalist world-system (Foster and McChesney 2017).

However, a historical perspective shows us that the capitalist world-system had already previously disposed of the populations of the global periphery as a transnational RAL through their enslavement, colonization, and expatriation (Molinero-Gerbeau 2017). Africans, Americans, Asians, and Oceanians have already been appropriated as cheap (or free) labor available to the global core. The contemporary global division of labor is the direct heir to these processes, and today's international migrants are the post-colonial descendants of these populations. The conversion of the so-called "Third World" into a supplier of variable capital is a function historically constructed by colonialism and the expansion of the world-system (Wallerstein 1983).

Today, the entire population of the global periphery constitutes the largest RAL in history in what is undoubtedly the most recent and most extensive appropriation of the productive frontier of labor since the long sixteenth century.

As we shall see in the following sections, Haiti has been subject to these factors in various forms throughout its history, transforming its population into a gigantic global RAL mainly through violence. Haiti is a state whose perpetual structural violence has generated conditions of poverty and social instability that have pushed part of its population to migrate and become a producer of cheap labor that augments the RAL. The following section will briefly review the forms that violence has taken throughout history and the structural effects it has had.

Structural and Historical Violence in Haiti

Since 1492, Haiti has been the object of structural and endemic violence provoked by the world powers of the core. To gain control of the newly conquered land, the Spanish imposed slavery on Haiti's native Arawak people and renamed both parts of the island Hispaniola (Trouillot 1995). These conditions—marked by extreme violence and the various diseases imported from Europe—led to the extermination of the native population (Cook 2002). Their subsequent replacement by enslaved Africans gave rise to a system that would last for around two centuries.

In 1697, under the Treaty of Ryswick, Spanish colonial control over the island was reduced, and Spain ceded its western part to the French, who later named it Saint-Domingue (Midy 2006). However, the change of authority did not alter the conditions of slavery that prevailed on the island. On the contrary, it led to a large increase in slavery on the western side of the island since the French favored the plantation system. The Haitian population, made up of French colonists and enslaved persons of African origin, was governed by a regime of terror and violence from the former toward the latter. As in Spanish times, slaves who rebelled had one of their limbs mutilated, and if they struck a colonist, they were hanged in the public square (Tardieu 1999). The latter method illustrated the fate reserved for those who did not wish to obey their owners, as slaves were considered the master's property (Burgat 1998). The violent slave system would prove quite profitable, as the colony of Saint-Domingue, known as "the pearl of the Antilles," would become the colony that produced the most wealth for France, the most prosperous in the Americas (Blancpain 2004). However, after three centuries of violent domination, in 1791, at the Bois Caïman ceremony, the slaves began a bloody revolt in their quest for freedom that would last 13 years. During these years of war, all the plantations were reduced to ashes, houses were destroyed, and the loss of human life on both sides was numerous (Lamrani 2021).

After Haiti proclaimed independence in 1804, the new nation sought to become an example of freedom and prosperity. Moreover, keen to export its experience, the country collaborated with

Simon Bolivar, who fought for independence for some of the Spanish colonies. Despite this, these factors did not help Haiti escape the onslaught of core powers whose position in the world-system was threatened by Haiti's proclamation as an independent country and its collaboration with others who wanted to put an end to slavery (Hurbon 2007). In addition to the economic embargoes and constant attacks from ex-colonial powers, including France's attempts to regain control of the territory, there was also internal unrest. Two years after the proclamation of the Republic of Haiti, in 1806, Emperor Jean Jacques Dessalines, one of the pioneers of the War of Independence, was assassinated on his way back from the South because of the agrarian reform policy he had advocated (Saint-Louis 2015). The internal struggle for power after Dessalines' death became a civil war that prevented the country's development and led to its division into one Kingdom in the North and two republics: South and West (Hector 2009). On the diplomatic front, France continued to exert pressure on Haiti and all countries wishing to enter into trade relations with the new nation (Labelle 1978). For example, Haiti, for being considered an anarchy of slaves in rebellion against their master, was refused entry to the Summit of the Americas held in Panama in 1826 (Dorigny 2003).

The new Haitian state, shaken from the outside and the inside, would not live in peace, perpetuating its history of violence: "Haiti's political life in the 19th century was characterized by a succession of coups d'état and revolutions until the country was finally occupied by the United States in 1915" (Josh Dewind and Kinley III 1988: 21). Indeed, the internal struggles and geopolitical violence waged in Haiti during the nineteenth century served as a pretext for the United States to send a military force to occupy the country in the early twentieth century (Blancpain 1999). This U.S. presence in the country, which lasted over 19 years, however, did not reduce the level of violence that had characterized Haiti throughout its history. On the contrary, to take control of the country, the occupying forces used violence and waged war on the resistance armies of the Cacos and Piquets in the country's North and South (Porter, C. Méheut, C., Apuzzo, M. and Gebrekidan 2022). The Haitian resistance fighters refused to submit to the American occupiers, who wanted to impose the corvée system from when Haiti was a French colony (Saint-Fort 2016). Historians estimate that 11,000 Haitians lost their lives during the U.S. occupation, which was also financed by the national economy since the occupier controlled it completely (Saint-Fort 2016).

The post-occupation period was no more peaceful. From 1957 to 1986, Haiti experienced 29 years of dictatorship under the Duvalier fathers and sons. During this period, the country's wealth was robbed, corruption was at an all-time high, and political assassinations were sadly commonplace. Opponents of Duvalier's rule had to contend with the Tontons Macoutes militia created by François Duvalier, who "have only one soul: Duvalier, know only one leader: Duvalier, fight only for one destiny: Duvalier in power" (Hurbon 1987: 19), and whose mission it was to

silence political opponents in any way they could. The Duvalier dictatorship ended on February 7, 1986 with the forced departure of Jean-Claude Duvalier, following violent demonstrations in every city in the country. In the words of Le Devoir (2021), "After Jean-Claude Duvalier's departure, insecurity and crime continued to take on a political tone under the military governments. They peaked during the military coup, from September 30, 1991 to October 15, 1994." If in the Duvalier era, the Tontons Macoutes were the parallel force helping to establish the dictatorship, in the Aristide era and the years that followed, it was the Zenglendos, armed gangs that controlled the country's biggest cities. The communes of the West, Artibonite, North, and North-West were infected by armed gangs who kidnapped, murdered, and controled customs and the country's main roads. Assassination became the norm, and insecurity characterized every aspect of Haitian life to this day.

But violence in Haiti is not only human in origin. In addition to political violence, there is also natural violence, such as earthquakes, hurricanes, and tropical storms, that have had a considerable impact on Haiti's development as a violent nation. Among the most recent natural disasters was the earthquake of January 2010, which left between 200,000 and 230,000 people dead, nearly 300,000 injured, and around 1.5 million homeless, with material damage estimated at just over 14 billion dollars (Jabouin 2012). The earthquake of August 14, 2021 was equally devastating, claiming the lives of 2,248 people, injuring 12,763, and leaving 329 others missing across three heavily affected departments (SNGRD 2021). Meanwhile, Hurricane Matthew in October 2016 affected

> more than 2 million people, or around 20 percent of the country's population. The Haitian Government reported 546 dead, 128 missing, 439 injured, 175,500 people living in temporary shelters, and immediate needs for humanitarian assistance for 1.4 million people (around 12.9% of the population) (MICT/MTPTC 2017: 48).

The bad weather of June 2023 resulted in "42 deaths, 11 missing persons and 85 injured...more than 13,500 houses were flooded, affecting 12,779 families and leading to the evacuation of 6,334 people" (SNGRD 2023).

In conclusion, this brief historical overview shows how violence has been present and particularly virulent in Haiti's history. Since 1492, the country has lived constantly under the violence of colonizers, slavery, infighting, dictatorships, armed gangs, and geopolitical aggression, all of which have prevented it from opening up equitably to other nations of the world-system. The following section highlights some of the socio-structural effects of this violence and how they have contributed to turning large numbers of Haitians into a cheap global Reserve Army.

Structural Factors Shaping the Haitian RAL

As seen earlier, the historical evolution of the world-system has relied on the deepening domination of the core over the periphery to maintain the process of global accumulation. Colonization and slavery are only a small, albeit highly visible and relevant, part of the strategies deployed to maintain this hierarchy aimed not only at sustaining the asymmetry of power but at guaranteeing the supply of cheap variable capital (raw materials and labor) for the capitalist production of the world-system's core (Moore 2015b).

In fact, natural disasters in Haiti have historically aggravated both political and structural violence, creating conditions that perpetuate cycles of suffering and exploitation. For example, the 2010 earthquake not only caused massive physical destruction but also deepened pre-existing inequalities, leading to increased displacement and the erosion of already fragile livelihoods. The state's inadequate response to the disaster, combined with external interference and the mobilization of foreign aid, contributed to the expansion of structural violence through displacement, dispossession, and worsening poverty (Hernández 2011). These conditions, marked by precarity and subalternization, are often exploited by political elites who, under the guise of "reconstruction," further entrench inequalities and suppress dissent (Toussaint 2013). Additionally, natural disasters have historically provided the backdrop for political violence. For instance, the 1791 slave uprising in Haiti was precipitated by the oppressive conditions that included exploitation following environmental degradation, with the revolution serving as both a response to political tyranny and structural violence (Fick 1990). In this way, natural disasters do not merely destroy physical infrastructure but also act as catalysts for deeper political violence, including coercive migrations, invasions, and the establishment of dictatorial regimes, all of which are rooted in the systemic vulnerability produced by both nature and state (Gordon 1997). This section will argue that the violence suffered by Haiti directly provoked the conversion of its population into a gigantic global RAL.

We can situate the beginning of this process with the slavery period that lasted over 300 years, during which the original inhabitants of this corner of the world, the Arawaks, were exterminated and the men and women who came from the African continent to replace them were enslaved. Compared to other territories where the formation of the RAL was subtler, this fact shows how the first population movements aimed to deliberately convert Haiti's inhabitants into a workforce directly available to the colonizer. The objective was clear: the metropolis needed cheap raw materials to support accumulation and counteract European power struggles (Moore 2021). This was made possible by the exploitation of free labor (slaves) and the violent appropriation of land for the monoculture of sugar cane, indispensable in the new European diet. Moreover, according to Moore (2000: 413), "sugar monoculture rapidly exhausted soil fertility through a process of highly unequal, and very rapid, ecological exchange." This contributed to the subsequent

formation of the RAL by reducing the arable land available to the population during the post-colonial period.

The scale of monoculture in the colony of Santo Domingo was such that the island became the main producer of sugarcane in the world-system. This lead to deforestation and the monopolization and dispossession of arable land to the detriment of the peasants. In the words of Pierre,

> [t]he ecological consequences of colonization in Haiti are still being felt today and have worsened over time. In addition to the disappearance of the Arawaks 25 years after the arrival of the Spaniards, the black slave trade and the plundering of the territory's resources, the expansionism of the conquistadores and French capitalism have for 300 years ravaged the nature of Santo Domingo (Pierre 2020: 131).

The disappearance of the Taïnos, monoculture, the introduction of new forms of crops, the destruction of the habitat, and the extraction of gold, among other things, were, in a way, the beginning of the ecological disaster and rural exodus in Haiti. Pierre (2020: 132) states that "[c]olonialist violence and additions of European origin to the fauna, flora and pathogenesis of America caused the destruction of millennia-old civilizations such as those of the Aztecs, Incas or Arawaks," ultimately leading to the rural exodus. This process of weakening peasant power relations was to be gradual and deepened with the American occupation in the first half of the twentieth century. Five centuries of peasant dispossession led to the impoverishment and decapitalization of communities to the benefit of an elite, significantly reducing development opportunities, knowing that

> when family businesses were the predominant economic systems in rural agriculture communities, researchers talked about "multiplier effects" of three and four; money generated in the agricultural sector would circulate in the community, changing hands from one entrepreneurial family to another three or four times before leaving the rural community. This greatly enhanced the community's economic viability (Magdoff, Foster, and Buttel 2000: 73).

As in other areas of the world-system (Araghi 1995), the decapitalization of peasants was a factor in the creation of the RAL, which led to mass migration to the cities, particularly Port-au-Prince, generating a process of shantytownization. The inability to integrate rural migrants into the urban economic fabric reinforced social exclusion and posed problems for urban management. Faced with a lack of economic prospects, some rural migrants opt for emigration, often clandestine, to other countries, while others join armed gangs.

In short, the colony's structure remained after independence, leaving the heirs of the former slaves with little possibility of real emancipation, accelerating internal (rural-urban) and external

(emigration) migratory flows, and aggravating economic inequalities and social exclusion. Haitians, dispossessed of their land, will have nothing to sell but their labor power in an economy where options are reduced to participating in violence, supporting the autocratic power of elites, or emigrating. Kaarsholm (2020: 6) states that "Haitians have been dispossessed, expropriated, and have become 'radically dependent' for the subsistence of their livelihoods in a capitalist labor market," creating an enormous RAL that can be exploited globally. Indeed, many of these expropriated people moved to the Dominican Republic during the same period, creating a panoply of day laborers and seasonal migrants who, thanks to their low cost, underpinned the productivity of the global sugar cane industry (Wooding 2014; Martinez 2018).

The second factor behind the creation of the Haitian RAL is the geopolitical violence, wars, invasions, dictatorships, and international blockades that have prevented the country from developing and integrating into the global concert of nations on an equal footing. In fact, this structural violence is part of a strategy of subalternization designed both to prevent Haiti from becoming an example of liberation in the world-system, and to maintain the territory as a provider of variable capital. Thus, since Haiti declared independence, trade relations with other countries have always been based on inequality. In the words of Etienne,

> Exclusive trade with France placed the colony in a situation of total dependence on the mother country both for the sale of its tropical commodities and for its supply of manufactured goods and black labour. Thus, European products—flour, wine, tools—sold at exorbitant prices on the colonial market. In contrast, tropical commodities—sugar, coffee, indigo, and cotton—were bought at very low prices (Etienne 2007: 67).

Politically, the sidelining of Haiti by France, the United States, and other New World countries continued as a mechanism of domestication and submission. A nation of former slaves could neither become fully free nor prosper because that would threaten the geopolitical interests of the core. Indeed, even though the country contributed manpower and munitions to the Latin American wars of independence, these turned against Haiti. Let us not forget that the United States continued to benefit from slavery long after independence, so Haiti's punishment for breaking this pattern would be international isolation. Thus, as Léonard (2003: 213) states, "the American Congress successfully opposed Haiti's participation in the summit of the independent countries of America, held in Panama in 1826."

Subsequently, the Americans took direct control of the country in two ways. At the beginning of the twentieth century, intending to reduce European influence on the territory, they invested in Haiti through several companies such as Tropical Dyewood, American Dyewood, National Railroad, and the Corporation Trust of America from 1908 and 1909 (Etienne 2007). This was accompanied by corruption, giving them unprecedented political power. In the words of Castor

(1988: 33), "Solidly established in Haitian economic life, foreign businessmen also exerted a direct influence on political life, supporting governments, financing 'revolutions,' participating in the fall or accession to power of presidents, flouting all the laws of the land." Based on the principle: who finances, commands, the presence of the United States through its various companies placed it in a privileged position in Haiti's politics. By obeying the dictates of the United States, the country fell under another form of colonization, which, at the beginning of the twentieth century, became a formal occupation that lasted from 1915 to 1934.

American colonization was fundamentally the colonization of the imagination, which would later extend to the self-colonization of the Haitian imagination. It was more mental and psychic enslavement than physical enslavement. The Americans acted in such a way as to precondition the Haitians so that they would do the wilĺ of the United States without any need for physical domination (Louis 2010: 239).

The 19 years of U.S. occupation contributed significantly to the impoverishment of the peasants, who were dispossessed of their land in favor of U.S. companies and joined the RAL. Indeed, Haitian migration in the twentieth century was accentuated by the American occupation of Haiti from 1915 to 1934 (Audebert 2011). Moreover, this migration was not only spontaneous but also directly driven by the Haitian government. With a surplus of labor in their territories, Haitian authorities and U.S. companies facilitated the recruitment of Haitian workers to travel to Cuba to work on their plantations. This was also the case in the Dominican Republic. The migrant workers were mostly men with a very low level of education, as they were engaged in agriculture while in Haiti (Perusek 1984).

After the departure of the occupiers in 1934, the country continued its descent into hell, facing various coups d'état, the bloody Duvalier dictatorship, the 1991 *coup d'état*, and the departure of Aristide in 2004, in exile as President in office. The instability drifted into constant social violence and flagrant political corruption while continuing the process of economic collapse and impoverishment of the population. Converted into an immense RAL, Haitian society had no other option than to participate in the violence, migrate, or try to subsist under terrible conditions that continue to this day.

Therefore, the state's governance is the third structural factor in the production and reproduction of the Haitian RAL. An apparent effect is the lack of investment in education due to corruption and violence. From the period of slavery to the present day, the country has never developed an education system capable of training its population. This has perpetuated its subalternization and made the Haitian workforce only globally competitive enough to enter the lower echelons of low-cost labor markets.

Today, 20 percent of children aged 6-10 do not attend school (Haiti Libre 2021). Already impoverished, access to higher education is a luxury for most of the population. Only 22 percent

of higher education institutions are public, while 78 percent are private (CRISH 2023). Even those who do have access to education face significant obstacles, such as street demonstrations and political unrest, violence due to natural disasters, and armed gang violence. This means that a student in Haiti can spend between seven and ten years to complete a degree in medicine, for example (Le Nouvelliste 2023).

Political instability has also worked against any initiative aimed at improving the lives of Haitian citizens. After three decades of the Duvalier dictatorship, Haiti's fledgling democracy suffered a *coup d'état* against President Aristide in the 1990s, which brought the country to an economic standstill. Daudet (1992: 93) tells us that,

> [o]n October 3, 1991, resolution MRE/RES.1/91, condemning the coup d'état... recommended that member states adopt measures aimed at the diplomatic isolation of the de facto authorities in Haiti, as well as the suspension of all commercial, financial and economic ties with Haiti, with the exception of strictly humanitarian aid (Daudet 1992: 93).

Aristide remained in exile until 1994, when he returned to finish his term as president. A severe trade embargo on the country marked Aristide's three years in exile. Those living along the border emigrated to the Dominican Republic to work on the plantations. Smuggling and exploitation at border points were also commonplace. To escape this subhuman misery, the population sought to flee the country in makeshift boats to the United States and other islands. Despite attempts to regain a sense of normalcy, no government in the twenty-first century has so far guaranteed the country's stability, and violence and corruption have continued unchecked. This evidence is so palpable that the 2023 Transparency International Corruption Perception Index report ranked Haiti 172nd out of 180 countries, close to Somalia and South Sudan. According to Roc (2007: 2), "Impunity reigns, corruption is endemic and 60% of the population lives below the poverty line." The consequence of this is that, in 2020, Haiti was ranked 163rd out of 191 in the Human Development Index drawn up by the United Nations[1].

The fourth factor in the violence in Haiti that is at the root of the reproduction of the RAL is the natural disasters that have ravaged the country. Between 1900 and 2011, Haiti experienced some 30 large-scale natural disasters (Rainhorn 2013). The main consequences are loss of life, destruction of homes and infrastructure, and loss of economic resources, particularly food. Hurricane seasons are very damaging to Haiti for many reasons. First, as Feldmann (2013: 32) says, "the majority of the population works in the informal sector." Secondly, no infrastructure enables the country to cope with disasters. Thirdly, houses are built in areas at high risk of flooding. Fourthly, the population is not accompanied by the authorities. All this is made worse by

[1] See https://hdr.undp.org/data-center/human-development-index#/indicies/HDI

corruption, which leads the country to total impoverishment. In the words of Von Einsiedel and Malone (2006: 164): "Already adverse humanitarian circumstances were aggravated when a series of tropical storms hit Haiti in 2004, burying entire cities in mud and killing thousands." A few months later, in September of the same year, further floods ravaged the departments of Artibonite and Nord-Ouest, causing the death of thousands of people and the destruction of thousands of homes (Rainhorn 2013). The livelihoods of peasants in communes affected by tropical storm flooding were destroyed, intensifying the exodus of rural populations to the cities and emigration to the Dominican Republic and other neighboring islands.

From 2010 to the present day, three natural disasters stand out in the minds of Haitians: Hurricane Matthew in 2016 and the earthquakes of 2010 and 2021. These caused the deaths of between 230,000 and 300,000 people, leaving around 4 million affected or homeless (Schuller 2016; Dupuy 2021). According to a study by the Ministry of Industry and Commerce (2016), "the total damage caused by the hurricane [Matthew] on the region's economy amounts to almost HTG 6,266,550,349. Losses amounted to around HTG 7,171,824,485.4. These include variations in economic flows, including production and inventory shortfalls and unrealized sales." Meanwhile, according to UNICEF data (2022), the earthquake of 2021 affected more than "800,000 people, including 340,000 children. According to official data, more than 2,200 people died, and some 115,000 homes, 97 health facilities and 1,250 schools were destroyed or damaged." All these natural disasters have contributed to the population's impoverishment, maintaining its character as a RAL driven to emigration.

In sum, these various forms of violence have created a poor population with no opportunities, whose options are reduced to joining armed gangs or emigrating to work abroad. In short, political and geopolitical violence, corruption, instability, and natural disasters have turned the Haitian population into a gigantic global RAL, dispossessed, proletarian, and precarious.

Insertion and Structural Function of the Haitian RAL

Violence has marked Haitian history, provoking the transformation of its people into a gigantic global RAL both directly and indirectly by joining forces with other structural factors defined earlier. This section will look at the main destinations of Haitian migrant workers and the structural functions they have developed.

In Haiti, the reserve army of labor manifests through distinct rural and urban dynamics that together sustain an easily exploitable workforce. In rural areas, widespread land dispossession, soil depletion, and the collapse of subsistence agriculture—aggravated by decades of neoliberal economic policies—have expelled thousands from viable farming livelihoods, forcing them into seasonal and circular migrations, particularly to Dominican sugar plantations (Castel 2021). This

cyclical mobility creates a transnational labor pool that capital can mobilize during harvest seasons and discard afterward (Boyer 2018). Simultaneously, chronic neglect of rural infrastructure and social services entrenches dependency on precarious wage labor markets, with little alternative for rural populations (Castel 2021). In urban centers, rapid migration from the countryside has saturated informal sectors such as street vending, motorcycle taxis, and domestic work, while formal industrial jobs remain scarce (Desrosiers 2017). The oversupply of labor depresses wages and conditions across both formal and informal markets, reinforcing vulnerability (Patterson 2015). Additionally, many urban unemployed aspire to migrate abroad but lack the resources to do so, rendering them an immobile yet perpetually available labor force for domestic exploitation or future transnational recruitment (Boyer 2018). Together, these rural and urban processes ensure a constant flow of low-cost labor, reproducing Haiti's role as a reservoir of cheap, disposable workers for capitalist accumulation both domestically and abroad (Castel 2021).

History records that the emigration of Haitians fleeing violence and seeking to contribute to the liberation of other peoples was constant after the country's independence (Fischer 2013). However, there is no systematized data on the number of Haitian migrants who left the island during this period. Only at the beginning of the twentieth century, with the American occupation of Haiti, did we begin to have data indicating the dimensions of the phenomenon and identifying where the Haitian RAL went. Indeed, as we have already mentioned, during the occupation, Haitian migration was directly stimulated by the United States, in agreement with the Haitian government. This program aimed to ensure the availability of cheap labor to support global sugar production, suffering from a general drop in prices on international markets in the second half of the twentieth century. This led to a withdrawal of the *Cocolos*, who had worked on sugar cane plantations in the Dominican Republic until then, as the new labor prices set by the companies were no longer profitable for them.

Consequently, only a labor force made precarious by violence and lack of opportunities, such as the Haitian one, could guarantee the continuity of production without affecting prices. Moreover, the national government, controlled by the American occupier, acted as a facilitator of the process. According to Coulange Méroné (2018: 180), "In a depressed context in which the price of sugar fell internationally, these companies found in the Haitian a cheaper labor force than cocola." American Companies hiring Haitians had a double standard, as Haitian migrant workers received around "20 to 30 cents on the dollar, while in Panama they paid 3 dollars to the Americans for the same work" (François 2018: 5). Thanks to this cheap labor, Latortue (1985: 47) says that companies working in the sector were able to weather the crisis so "the relative progress experienced in the sugar field is largely due to the presence of Haitian immigrants working for low wages." Although the available data are not very precise, Koffi-Tessio (2005: 76) writes that "a census carried out in 1920 announced the presence of 20,000 Haitians in the Dominican Republic

and 70,000 others in Cuba," that is, around 90,000 workers out of a population estimated at 2.22 million at the time, or 4 percent of the total population, without taking into account spontaneous displacements outside the program.

This migration of workers to the Dominican Republic has continued in various forms to the present day, continuously replicating the same logic: Haitians occupy the lower rungs of the corporate hierarchy and carry out the less automated work of production, which weakens their living conditions not only in terms of wages but also stability. This is a critical factor in creating and maintaining the RAL for the sugar industry to be organized and become profitable, thanks to the cheap employment of workers dispossessed by violence in their country of origin. According to Martínez (1997: 231), in the Dominican Republic, "the sugar company occupational hierarchy is stratified by ethnic ground, nationality, and residence status," and within this structure, Haitians could only occupy the position of agricultural laborers on sugarcane plantations. Moreover, Hintzen (2016: 39–40) notes that "Haitians on sugar plantations were still an accepted presence, but Haitians living elsewhere were not." Their place in Dominican society was thus strictly limited by labor, reproducing the position occupied by slaves a few centuries before. They are indispensable to production but are violently governed to avoid their presence in other segments of society. This is why, in 2013, the Dominican Government issued decree 168-13 denationalizing Dominicans of Haitian origin who had been in the territory since 1929 (Lazard 2019).

Haitian migrants who fled the violence of the occupying force, misery, and dispossession of their land headed to the Dominican Republic to work on the plantations, where they faced further violence. This manifests in different ways, such as extremely precarious working and housing conditions, even neo-slavery; but also, directly, as shown by the events of 1937, when President Trujillo had thousands of Haitians and Dominicans of Haitian ethnicity massacred with bladed weapons in the border region (Derby and Truits 1993). It should be noted that in 1939, Trujillo nationalized the sugarcane industries and continued recruiting Haitian migrant labor until he had a contract with the Haitian government (Turits 2002). The massacre thus reveals a desire to avoid a spontaneous presence of Haitians on Dominican territory, limiting it to the appropriation of the RAL for the exclusive benefit of the sugar industry. The violence of both the origin and destination countries serves to limit the spaces that Haitians can occupy, restricting their functions to those reserved for the RAL (Derby 1994; Wooding and Moseley-Williams 2004). According to the agreement, "the Haitian government received a payment of around two million dollars per yearly contract, as was the case during the American occupation" (François 2018: 8), showing a continuum between colonial slavery, U.S. occupation, and post-independence where sugar production has always depended on the Haitian RAL.

After the Trujillo contract, the practice of organizing the migration of Haitians to work in the Dominican sugar cane industry was renewed through an agreement between the Haitian and

Dominican states during the Duvalier dictatorship from 1957 to 1986 (de los Reyes Ramírez 2022). At the same time, in the second half of the twentieth century, the destinations of the Haitian RAL were diversified, including French Guiana to work in the banana fields and sugar production, thanks to the authorization of the French and Haitian governments to organize these trips (Joseph 2020).

During this same period, from 1957 to 1986, the Haitian RAL moved throughout the Caribbean, while other forms of migration to countries in the Americas, Africa, and Europe began to take hold. These resulted from the Duvalier dictatorship, which expelled or forced its opponents into exile. According to Koffi-Tessio (2005: 77), "As early as 1978, however, Haitian nationals constituted a population of undesirables turned away from the Bahamas, Cuba, all the West Indies, and even Venezuela, and turned to Guadeloupe, Paris and French Guiana." In short, entire families were exiled or disappeared between 1957 and 1986 (Etienne 2007). Around 50,000 went to the United States and 4,000 to the Canadian province of Quebec (Audebert 2011). Those who arrived in the U.S. State of Florida

> remained in a precarious legal situation in the early 1980s, with Washington refusing to grant them permanent legal status. The uncertainty of their fate in a land of exile led Haitians to opt for strategies of community withdrawal, with the family as the main setting (Audebert 2004: 12).

In Venezuela after 1986, the arriving Haitian migrant population took to selling ice cream, because on the one hand, it was the easiest way to find a job and regularize their status. Conversely, as noted by Charier:

> The big distribution companies have a vested interest in ensuring the continuity of this system, as they know that these rural Haitians remain indebted to their parents who gave them access to this job, and will be reliable and dependent on the goodwill of the company (Clarier 1999: 178).

In France, Mooney and Erbès-Seguin state that

> Haitians face social exclusion. Firstly, 20% are undocumented, and only 33% have French nationality. Secondly, although many have an average or even high level of education, they suffer from high unemployment rates, close to 30%. Thirdly, they live in the suburbs of Paris that are stratified by racialization and social origin (Mooney and Erbès-Seguin 2008: 21).

Wherever Haitians settle, they occupy the lower rungs of the labor market. Structural violence thus deprives the population of opportunities and feeds the need for cheap labor in countries that have historically contributed to the country's chronic instability.

Five years later, after the departure of Jean-Claude Duvalier in 1986, from 1991 to 1994 the country experienced another wave of migration driven by violence and deepening poverty. This was triggered by General Raoul Cédras' *coup d'état* against President Jean-Bertrand Aristide and further compounded by the economic embargo imposed by the United States, which exacerbated socioeconomic conditions and forced thousands of Haitians to flee by sea and land (Fatton 2002; Farmer 2006). The combination of political repression under the military regime and international sanctions intensified the structural vulnerabilities of the Haitian population, pushing many into precarious migratory routes in search of safety and livelihood (Ferguson 2003; Schuller 2007). According to Audebert (2012), during the period of the *coup d'état* from 1991 to 1994, inflation rose from 7 percent to 52 percent, and the country's gross domestic product fell by 40 percent. This was the period of the "Boat People" when more than ten thousand Haitians left Haiti for the United States to escape the violence and economic crisis that was eating away at the country (Audebert 2012). Others continued to go to the Dominican Republic to join the RAL on the sugar cane plantations.

In the aftermath of the 2010 earthquake, it is difficult to speak of countries of origin, transit, and destination, as in the Haitian RAL case. In some cases, the migrants started their journey from the Dominican Republic, which can be considered both a transit and an origin country (Wooding and Moseley-Williams 2004); other countries in South America that were considered transit countries have become host countries in the face of the hardening of migration policies in Southern countries (Martínez Pizarro and Cano 2015; OIM 2017). Finally, some others that were considered host countries have become transit countries because migrants find it impossible to regularize their migratory status or because their expectations are not being met (Luiz and Cabral 2021). According to Audebert and Joseph (2022: 15) Haitian migration now has a "multiplicity of places of departure, transit, settlement, destination, return, and remigration, which challenges the traditional patterns of transnational migration in South America." Most of this migration was made up of young people aged between 21 and 40, heading for Latin American countries such as Brazil, which in 2014 was preparing to host the Confederations Cup and Men's World Cup, and needed cheap labor (La presse 2021) to build and repair stadiums. A large part of this population also moved to Chile a few years later because, from 2011 to 2018, the country needed labor for menial jobs, and the prerequisites for entry were minimal. Indeed,

> in 2019, Chile and Brazil hosted respectively 180,000 and 160,000 Haitian migrants according to the most conservative estimates 40,000 the number of Haitian people in Ecuador 10. 000 in Peru, 7,000 in Argentina there are an estimated 8,000 Haitian people in the Cooperative Republic of Guyana, 15,000 in Suriname and 40,000 in French Guiana (Audebert and Joseph 2022: 5).

As noted in Haïti Libre (2023), "It is estimated that there are more than 80,000 Haitians (most of them irregular) in the Bahamas, a country of only 350,000 inhabitants." In Chile, following Amode we can note that

> the high concentration of the Haitian workforce in construction (18.3 percent of the Haitian active population versus only 7.9 percent of the national active population), commerce (15.7 percent, the same as for Chilean workers), industry (14.2 percent, versus 6.4 percent of national workers) and agriculture (10 percent versus 6.2 percent for the national population) (Amode 2019: 187).

In all these contexts, most Haitians are employed in the informal labor market, continuing its historic role of supporting the productive patterns of the countries of destination thanks to its condition of cheap labor.

Even if the Haitian RAL diversified its destinations towards the end of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first century, its insertion has always followed the same trend. Today, in the Dominican Republic, more than 90 percent of sugarcane and by-product production workers are Haitian migrants, occupying the last slot in the social pyramid (Swanson 2022). Meanwhile, according to data published by Dominican Sugar Institute, "exports of cut sugar as of September 30 [2020], reached the amount of 219,096 metric tons raw value, equivalent to 211,278 metric tons commercial value, for the amount of US$113.2 million" (INAZUCAR 2020: 16), revealing how the entire profitability of the sector is built on the exploitation of the Haitian RAL.

In short, structural and historical violence have generated a RAL that has essentially provided the global sugar sector with abundant cheap labor for its subsistence, sustainability, and growth. As this sector is fundamental to maintaining the capitalist world-system (Moore 2015a), this RAL performed a key structural function.

Even if Haitian migration has diversified its destinations over time, the insertion logic of this global RAL has followed the same trends. Haitians are only allowed to reside in countries that previously contributed to their impoverishment, in subordinate positions within a neo-colonial logic.

The gender dimension of the reserve army of labor in Haitian migration to the Dominican Republic is critical to understanding the exploitation dynamics within the sugarcane industry. Haitian women, often relegated to informal and lower-paying sectors, experience a unique intersection of gender and labor exploitation. While men primarily work in the fields under grueling conditions, women typically engage in domestic labor, food processing, and various informal economic activities that offer minimal pay and little to no labor protections (Wooding 2007). This gendered division of labor perpetuates economic dependence, as women's roles in reproductive labor are undervalued, further limiting their opportunities for social mobility and

independence. Women also face heightened vulnerability to sexual exploitation, harassment, and physical abuse, both within and outside of the workplace (Castel 2021). Moreover, women's social invisibility in the formal labor market compounds their marginalization, as they are often excluded from collective bargaining efforts and labor unions, which tend to focus on male-dominated sectors like agriculture (Bauer 2018). This dual exploitation—gendered and economic—reinforces women's position in the reserve army of labor, rendering their work precarious and undervalued. As Wooding (2007) notes, this marginalization traps women in cycles of poverty and dependency, where their labor is vital to the survival of families but remains largely unrecognized within both the domestic and global economies.

Undeniably, this workforce is productive and profitable for the destination countries, as demonstrated by the fact that programs aimed at appropriating it continue to emerge. For example, on January 6, 2023, the President of the United States opened what is known in Haiti as the "Biden Program" to welcome Cuban, Haitian, Nicaraguan, and Venezuelan migrants. One year after the program's launch, 144,000 Haitians have already received permission to enter the United States, 138,000 of whom have already left Haiti (Haiti Libre 2024). Canada has also announced the opening of a program in March 2023 aimed at skills-based family reunification for sectors with labor shortages. It remains to be seen how these Haitians arriving in the United States and Canada through these programs will be integrated into the labor market and the two cultures, but it is foreseeable that they will occupy subordinate positions in sectors such as agriculture. On the other hand, there is no doubt that Haiti, because of these departures, has lost fundamental human resources that could contribute to its development (RFI 2023).

Conclusion

As we have demonstrated throughout this article, the creation of RAL is inherent to the capitalist system. The availability of a dispossessed, precarious, and abundant workforce guarantees downward pressure on labor costs, which promotes the accumulation of surplus value and thus ensures the smooth running of the system. Nevertheless, the RAL is not only created within countries. Specific geopolitical movements, the most obvious of which is the creation of colonies in the global periphery, have dispossessed entire societies and subjugated their economies in the lower echelons of the world-system hierarchy. In the case of Haiti, the colonial conquest of the island and the subsequent structural, geopolitical, endemic, and phenomenological violence that has characterized its political life, from slavery to contemporary armed gangs, combined with violence due to natural disasters, have converted the country's population into a dispossessed RAL for the benefit of other countries, in particular the United States and the Caribbean (Dery and Molinero-Gerbeau 2024).

The Haitian reserve army of labor (RAL) became key to maintaining the profitability of the global sugar industry, an industry built by colonial powers and later reinforced by the United States in the early twentieth century—the same nations that historically conquered, dominated, and subjugated Haiti since its very inception (Fick 1990; Dupuy 2014). Although Haitian workers continue to be concentrated in Dominican sugar production, the contemporary diversification of destinations has meant that countries such as Canada and Chile also have access to this cheap labor, perpetuating the global interest in maintaining Haiti under a regime of violence (Wooding and Moseley-Williams 2004). The country's chronic instability and lack of economic opportunities continue to reproduce a RAL that is far more beneficial to global powers than to Haiti's national development (Castel 2021). As Farmer (2004) argues, the intersection of structural violence and global economic interests locks Haiti in a cycle of dispossession and labor exploitation. The way out of this vicious circle, in which the country has been mired for centuries, remains uncertain, but understanding the hidden interests behind its subalternization may help lay the groundwork for constructing an alternative future.

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