2
Economic Interests Are Color-Blind: On Class Divisions in Haitian History

In Haiti, foreigners are often called ‘blan!’ . The unknown person is identified in the simplest possible way. He does not even have to be white. Haitians often refer to each other as nèg. This sounds strange for those not used to it. In the worst case, they interpret it, wrongly, as derogatory. But nèg simply means ‘man’ or ‘hey, you!’ Nèg, however, also means black, as opposed to blan or milat. Skin color has never been registered in Haitian censuses, but the overwhelming majority of all Haitians are black. Less than 10 percent are mulattoes, and then there are less than a thousand Levantines – Palestinians, Lebanese, and Syrians – who arrived in Haiti toward the end of the nineteenth century and at the beginning of the twentieth, and who have mainly married within their own group.

Among the first things that strike the foreigner in Haiti are the enormous social gaps. The members of the upper class are people who are as educated and cultivated as ever the Europeans, frequently even more. As everywhere else, the Haitian elite are sophisticated and amiable. Most of the time, they are relatively light-skinned, and rich. Frequently, they are also incredibly difficult. This is the case not least when it comes to their association with the population at large. Most Haitians are peasants. Haiti is a ‘classic’ peasant nation, and anthropologists, sociologists, and economists frequently write about peasant society. The peasants have nothing to do with the elite. They belong to what the French economist Gérard Barthélemy calls ‘Le pays en dehors’ – the outside society. The Haitian elite often pretend that the peasants do not exist. They do not identify with poor black devils who attempt to make a living for themselves and their families on infinitely small land plots. The gap between the upper and the lower classes often appears to be
insurmountable, but why does it exist? Does skin color have anything to do with it, as in so many other parts of the world?

In 1979, the English priest and political scientist David Nicholls published a book which attracted a great deal of attention, From Dessalines to Duvalier: Race, Colour and National Independence in Haiti, where he made a sharp distinction between race and skin color. According to Nicholls, race was always a unifying factor among the Haitians. All of them view themselves as linked by the African biological heritage, and the racial factor was an important component of the wars of liberation against the whites. Skin color, on the other hand – black or mulatto – has served to split the nation. Nicholls saw the social class divisions and the fight for power that characterized the entire nineteenth-century history of Haiti as a struggle between blacks and mulattoes. ‘...politics in Haiti from 1804 to 1915 was largely concerned with a struggle for power between two elite groups, designated principally by colour’, he writes.

Unfortunately, Nicholls’ thesis does not work. Not even in the case of the colonial society so impregnated by racism that existed until the slave uprising in 1791 is it possible to explain the social divisions only in terms of skin color. They were also economic. The whites, of course, were found at the top of the colonial hierarchy. Below them were the manumitted slaves – the affranchis (mainly mulattoes, the offspring of the French) – but their status was based not only on skin color. It was also economic. They were often both land and slave owners. (Altogether, they owned up to one-third of all land and one-fourth of all slaves.) At the bottom of the pyramid were the 450,000 slaves. When the independent nation of Haiti was proclaimed in 1804, after the French had been killed or driven out, the affranchis saw themselves as their natural successors. They were economically important, and they liked to identify themselves with European culture. This view was, however, not shared by everybody. The revolutionary leaders had mainly been black slaves, and they of course also aspired to elite status.

In addition, there was a difference between northern and southern Haiti. It was in the northern parts, on the plains around Cap Français (present-day Cap-Haïtien) that the colonial sugar economy developed. That was where the greatest number of slaves were found and where the position of the whites had been strongest. It was also in the northern part of the country that the uprising against the French had begun. The southern part was more mountainous, which made sugar cultivation difficult, and the number of slaves was lower, comparatively speaking. The affranchis were strong there. The geographic differences between