Power behind numbers: Statistical visibility and inequality in Colombia and the Dominican Republic

Introduction

I research issues of inequality from afar, from a computer screen, removed from the specific contexts where injustice takes place. Over the years, I've come to realize that inequality is less visible precisely where it manifests itself with greater tenacity. Those who most suffer the consequences of exclusion, exploitation, and abandonment tend to be absent in most datasets. A recent report about adolescent girls published by Plan International, *Counting the Invisible* (2016), is argues forcefully in this direction[1]. But those awash in opulence can also be invisible; they're capable of avoiding public scrutiny in order to evade taxes and even to profit from corruption and illegal economies.

There are many reasons for this state of affairs. In some cases, weak data is the result of *flawed theories*. Behind every measurement is an implicit or explicit theory regarding what is worth measuring and how to measure it. The conceptual categories that we are most familiar with are unable to shed light on several of the "subterranean trends" described by sociologist Saskia Sassen (2014). One example: in times of economic crisis, we often lose sight of some of the things we most value; and this "losing sight" is quite literal. This is because the classifications that we tend to rely on, such as "unemployment" and "economic growth," can hardly capture the reality of those who lose *everything* (their jobs, their homes, their life projects), who leave the country or are forced into less dignified jobs, and who even end up killing themselves out of desperation.

This critique is somewhat similar to the way in which Colombian economists of the 1970s decried the "disguised unemployment" hidden behind official numbers. They argued that unemployment could rise from 14% to 25% or even 33% by simply including additional criteria in the measurement process (International Labour Organization 1970, 18–21). It also resembles the way in which feminist economists criticize the invisibility—

[1] See, for example, the *#InvisibleGirls* campaign on social media

and thus the undervaluation—of "care work," which falls disproportionately on women. In all of these cases, we are talking about people or activities that are statistically invisible because the concepts that we regularly use fail to do justice to their particular situations.

In other cases, data deficiencies are the result of the *deliberate actions* of certain state actors who decide to turn a blind eye. This is what some have begun to call the choice of ignorance (Simon 2008)[2]. In Colombia, for example, figures on deaths related to malnutrition reported by the National Institute of Health (INS in Spanish) were recently tweaked in such a way that the number of such deaths decreased dramatically overnight. The INS also stopped reporting subnational-level data, essentially embracing a form of intentional invisibilization:

> When we called the INS to inquire about the reasons behind this move, we received a surprising reply. "I don't see the value in having departmental [subnational] data," said the public official on the other end of the line, "because we should act as a country and not as departments." But the value *is* clear: without this information, it is impossible to design policies and follow-up on the most vulnerable departments (Rodríguez-Garavito 2016).

The case of ethnic and racial statistics, to which I will refer extensively in this chapter, combines both situations. On the one hand, there are many conceptual difficulties within any attempt to measure "race" or "ethnicity," since our understanding of both categories is shaped by complex historical processes. For example, an Afro-descendant—an increasingly popular classification in Latin America, even if an imprecise one—can identify him or herself as "black" in Colombia or as "Indian" in the Dominican Republic. It is a complex category that is based on subjective, flexible, but still fundamental experiences. On the other hand, some governments choose ignorance or even go to the extreme of imposing invisibility on certain groups. Harsh Mander refers to this as *imposed invisibilization*: the

[2] *"Equality through invisibility—if we were to summarize the Republican strategy into a slogan—requires that ethnic and racial divisions not be represented. The credo of indifference to differences […] leads to promoting what I would call the choice of ignorance by removing any reference to ethnic or racial origin from policies or laws […] as well as from statistics" (Simon 2008, 8).*

denial of existence, of the special needs, and of the human rights of a particular group of people. Such denial goes hand in hand with the failure to collect reliable data that reflect this group's situation and the state's effort to stigmatize the group in the public eye, portraying these people as morally deficient, unproductive, and illegal, among other things[3].

At the other end of the spectrum, the link between statistical visibility and inequality implies something very different: many powerful groups have an interest in remaining under the radar in order to retain certain privileges. This is the case with tax havens, which made international headlines as a result of the Panama Papers at the beginning of 2015. It is also the case, for example, with Colombia, where the absence of an effective and updated cadaster makes land ownership behave as a sort of *internal tax haven*. An updated cadaster is nothing more than a complex enumeration exercise, but it has unwelcome consequences for those who have "loot" to defend. In both cases, statistical invisibility can be at the service of illicit economies, corruption, and tax evasion.

Finally, the invisibilization of entire populations can simply be the reflection of *precarious state institutions* that are unable to exercise a legitimate and effective presence throughout the national territory. We can expect very little from measurements produced by national statistical agencies that lack sufficient budgets and qualified personnel (Jerven 2013).

In summary, the connection between statistical visibility and inequality is tricky. Sometimes it is merely a reflection of the fragility of state institutions tasked with quantifying certain facets of the national territory. Other times it is a reflection of shortcomings in the concepts to which we have grown accustomed. It can also be the result of the decisions of state officials, or the efforts of powerful groups to remain invisible and thus cling to certain privileges. In the worst-case scenario, the link between statistical visibility and inequality reflects a combination of all of these factors at the same time.

[3] I am grateful to Harsh Mander for sharing some of these ideas with me.

The politics of numbers and the fight against inequality

In this chapter, I wish to highlight two issues in particular. First, the problem of statistical visibility is linked with the empowerment of the state in its quest to exercise rational control over the national territory. More recently, it's also related with fulfilling the state's commitments with regards to international human rights treaties. Second, it concerns the empowerment of historically marginalized populations who seek a sound statistical underpinning in order to frame and legitimize their claims before the state.

The argument concerning the empowerment of historically marginalized populations was eloquently put forth by the African Canadian Legal Clinic in a recent report submitted to the United Nations Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. The clinic notes that the absence of statistical data hinders the realization of the African Canadian community's right to self-determination:

> Without this data, the African Canadian community is significantly compromised in its ability to successfully organize itself around a firm statistically-grounded foundation that accurately captures the state of African Canadian life […] Being without this data also poses considerable challenges to the community's ability to set benchmarks or meet goals for the betterment of the community's economic, social and cultural well-being. By not providing or facilitating the development of an adequate statistical picture of African Canadian life, the Government of Canada impedes rather than promotes the African Canadian community's right of self determination. (African Canadian Legal Clinic 2016, 9–10).

The collection of ethnic and racial data, however, will always be surrounded by controversy and paradoxes. The visibility that has been achieved by indigenous and Afro-descendant movements has provoked backlash. It is still common to hear state agencies argue that they *cannot* collect ethnic and racial data because doing so would constitute a discriminatory act. This encapsulates one of the great paradoxes of liberal states: they are unable to achieve the political equality they seeks without, at the same time, introducing categorical distinctions into their institutional discourse and dealings. Without these

numbers, it is difficult historically for historically excluded populations to frame their demands for restorative justice. This is why liberal states struggle to find equilibrium between recognition and dismissal, and this is how they end up playing a part in the struggle around the legitimization and delegitimization of certain categories over others (Fourcade 2016).

This tension is recognizable in the evolution of ethnic and racial statistics in the Dominican Republic and Colombia. Although they are very different countries, the relations of power that underlie racial inequality have become intertwined with the issue of statistical visibility. More importantly, both cases let us draw more general lessons about how we can align the politics of numbers with the fight against inequality.

Ethnic and racial statistics in the Dominican Republic and Colombia: Between the choice of ignorance and recognition

At first glance, the collection of ethnic and racial data engenders a certain level of mistrust. This mistrust seems justified considering the horrific experiences of South Africa's apartheid, Nazi Germany, and European colonialism throughout the world. In all of these cases, people were classified—usually according to arbitrary criteria—in order to be placed within exclusionary, extractive, and repressive hierarchies (Loveman 2014, 4)[4]. But the journey toward a new political order based on liberal institutions means erasing the hierarchical and immutable distinctions of the past— at least at a rhetorical level. It calls for recognition of the fact that justice is blind and that, therefore, we need to be indifferent toward differences.

According to sociologist Mara Loveman (2014), Latin American elites adopted a practice of postcolonial colorblindness to distance their countries from the vilified Spanish racial system, while also ensuring that this did not threaten the privileges they obtained

[4] There is an abundant literature on these cases that goes beyond what I am able to write here. The collection of articles in María Eugenia Chaves Maldonado (2009), as well as the book by Mara Loveman (2014), provide a detailed account of the origins and effects of racial classification systems during colonialism in Latin America. Charles Tilly (1998) offers a general analysis of the functioning of "systems of categorical inequality" and discusses the racial categories promoted by the South African government during apartheid.

during colonialism. At the same time, in many of these countries it was still important to collect ethnic and racial data that would allow them to pursue a eugenic vision of "the nation's development." In other words, they wanted to ensure that nation-building projects (in which the nation was imagined as an integrated, homogenous, and *mestizo* unit) were developing in the right direction.

This is one of the main sources of mistrust, even among those who welcome a progressive vision of development. In the past, the collection of ethnic and racial data was at the service of the "science" of eugenics, whose basic aim was to erase "inferior races" responsible for these nations' underdevelopment. For many years, the gathering of ethnic and racial statistics was used to monitor and promote the miscegenation of Latin American countries (Zuberi 2001).

This situation changed in the mid-1900s with the discrediting of Nazism and the scientific pretenses behind eugenics. The conceptual shift was a huge one that could be seen in the collection of ethnic and racial data: now, differences within the population were not explained in "biological" (racial) terms but rather in "cultural" (ethnic) ones. While the consequences for Latin America were hard to foresee, in retrospect they make sense. According to Loveman, indigenous populations began to gain visibility because countries' questions around ethnic and racial diversity began to be formulated solely in terms of traits such as language or traditional clothing. But at the same time, *Afro-descendant populations began to lose visibility.* This change, incidentally, continued to be compatible with the notion of *mestizaje* as a marker of national progress that many Latin American countries maintain today.

This is why it's remarkable that the situation has changed again so drastically and in such a short period. While for the 1980 census, the Afro-descendant population was accounted for in just two countries (i.e. Brazil and Cuba), for the 2010 census, all of the countries in the region (except for the Dominican Republic) had gone back to include questions that made their populations' racial and ethnic diversity visible. This transformation was due in large part to the effective transnational mobilization of ethnic

and racial groups, who demanded justice in the face of conditions of structural discrimination to which they had historically been subjected. Equally important was the support secured by these groups within the international human rights system (Loveman 2014).

Books such as *the Sociolinguistic Atlas of Indigenous Peoples in Latin America* (UNICEF 2009), which includes contributions by researchers from throughout the region, reveal this historical transformation. This is due not just to the coordinated effort to highlight the region's ethnic and racial diversity while condemning the "statistical ethnocide" of the past, but also to the explicit criticism of how things used to be. The atlas concludes with a *new* narrative that is diametrically opposed to that promoted in previous years:

> [N]obody in their right mind will be able to continue to put forth the idea of Latin America as the most culturally homogeneous region on the planet, a uniformity that Latin American powers tried to fabricate within and for themselves. The collection and analysis of subaltern voices has shown the extent to which it has survived nonetheless, and how much it could have persisted if an ethnocidal system had not been imposed in Latin America that, under the pretext of equality before the law, discarded not just difference but also dignity (UNICEF 2009, 1077).

This publication highlights not only how mistrust toward the collection of ethnic and racial statistics tends to be unfounded but also how it can cause us to lose sight of the important link between recognition and self-worth.

Two Divergent Experiences

The cases of Colombia and the Dominican Republic offer a useful contrast to the big picture described above. In particular, both countries embraced distinct visions of the construction of national identity during the twentieth century: while the Colombian narrative centered around mestizaje and assimilation, the Dominican one revolved around an exclusive claim to Spanish and indigenous heritage. African culture and "blackness" in

general ended up associated with neighboring Haiti, making these traits incompatible with Dominican identity (Telles and Paschel 2014). As a result, national identity in the Dominican Republic overlapped with racial identity in a manner quite different from other countries in the region.

These enormous differences are clearly reflected in the statements of the two presidents in office during the 1960s: Guillermo León Valencia (Colombia) and Joaquín Balaguer (Dominican Republic). During that time, as the civil rights movement was underway in the United States, it is said that US president John F. Kennedy asked Valencia for advice on how to solve the "racial problem." Valencia answered by pouring some milk in his coffee while uttering the phrase "I believe this is the only solution"[5], an obvious metaphor for racial miscegenation. Balaguer, for his part, referred explicitly on several occasions to Dominican Republic's "race problem," warning of the danger posed by the country's proximity to Haiti. Many times he talked about the "Haitian race" as a real threat against which the Dominican Republic had to defend itself:

> Our racial origin and our tradition as a Hispanic people must not prevent us from recognizing that our nationality is in danger of disintegrating if we do not take drastic measures against the menace posed by neighboring Haiti (Balaguer, cited in Rodríguez 2004, 484).

These divergent historical processes have meant that race is lived and understood differently in each country (Telles and Paschel 2014). While the Colombian government embraced a message of miscegenation-as-national-identity that was not disputed until the 1990s, the Dominican state promoted the idea of blackness as constitutive of neighboring Haiti and as something from which the country needed to distance itself. As a result, in Colombia, a person's possession of certain traits (such as dark skin) is connected to their racial self-identification as expressed through labels such as *negro* (black), *moreno*, *mulato*, and *mestizo*. But in the Dominican Republic, the relationship among these same physical traits is rather weak, and people use a set of distinct labels such as *indio* (native), *indio*

[5] This anecdote is collected in Aristizábal (2004, 513).

claro (light-skinned native), and *indio oscuro* (dark-skinned native), which are sometimes qualified with the (problematic) daily distinction between *pelo malo* (bad curly hair) and *pelo bueno* (good straight hair).

This shows that racial distinctions within each country are not only fluid but also, above all, overwhelmingly influenced by politics. And this politics is translated to the more "technical" practice of data collection, ultimately determining who will be invisible and why. Censuses, according to a growing literature on the topic, play a critical role in nation building: they transform different characteristics into a common metric that remains stable in the minds of politicians, state officials, and the public at large (Espeland and Stevens 2008).

In Colombia, the Afro-descendant population disappeared from population censuses early on and began to reappear only in the 1990s, thanks to domestic and international pressure. On one hand, the 1991 Constitution changed the country's narrative from one of a *mestizo* nation to one of a pluri-ethnic and multicultural nation. On the other hand, various international bodies began to support the voices of Afro-descendant movements and pressured Colombia to make the fight against racial discrimination a priority. Meanwhile, in the Dominican Republic, the visibility of the Afro-descendant population endured until 1960. More strikingly, despite strong domestic and international criticism, it remains today the only country in Latin America that does not collect this type of information.

The Colombian case

Between 1990 and 2010, the collection of ethnic and racial data in Colombia entered a third phase. Initially, the cataloging of ethnic and racial groups had served to promote colonial control. During the second phase, these groups began to become invisible under the idea of integration and *mestizaje* as national ideology (Urrea, Viáfara, and Viveros 2014). The third phase represented a return to the past, but this time with democratic aims: the generation of ethnic and racial statistics began to be seen as necessary in the struggle against structural racism and the protection of historically marginalized groups.

Indigenous and Afro-Colombian organizations, inspired by the success of Brazilian activists, successfully lobbied the National Department of Statistics (DANE in Spanish) to include a question that would allow it to gather ethnic and racial information during the 1993 census. For these organizations, including this question in the national census meant securing the recognition needed to frame their internationally supported claims before the state. The census became a focal point in the fight for better living conditions among indigenous and Afro-descendant communities; official recognition began to be viewed as one of the most promising paths for putting an end to the symbolic violence of the past and opening new advocacy opportunities in the future (Loveman 2014; Paschel 2010).

These efforts gained enormous momentum in part because the Colombian state needed to increase its institutional capacities if it hoped to realize the aspirations of the new Constitution, but also because that same year the country became a signatory to the International Labour Organization's (ILO) 169 Convention, and collecting such information was one of the commitments outlined in the treaty. As a result, for the first time in more than seventy years, the census included a question that allowed the country's ethnic and racial diversity to come to light. But the question was formulated in purely "cultural" terms, which meant that a large number of Afro-Colombians, particularly those living in cities, responded "no" to the question asking if they belonged to "any ethnic group, indigenous group or black community." Very few Afro-descendants had a cultural tradition that enabled them to self-identify as part of a *community*. Thus, according to the census, Afro-descendants made up no more than 1.5% of the Colombian population.

Afro-Colombian activists did not hesitate in condemning the adequacy of these figures. Thanks to their advocacy efforts, three years, later the United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination included the following observation among its "principal subjects of concern":

> The lack of reliable statistical and qualitative data on the demographic composition of the Colombian population and on the enjoyment of political, economic, social and cultural rights by the indigenous and the Afro-Colombian people makes it

difficult to evaluate the results of different measures and policies[6].

Two years later, the Colombian government, in its periodic report to this United Nations treaty body, acknowledged that "the status of the Black communities of Colombia is only just beginning to be a subject of systematic study by the Colombian State" and that "the population of these communities is much larger and geographically more representative than previously thought."[7] This unleashed a heated controversy among the Colombian government, the international community, and civil society regarding how to answer a seemingly straightforward question: *What is the size of the Afro-descendent population in Colombia?*

Keenly aware of the material and symbolic consequences that the answer to this question could yield, the Afro-Colombian movement launched a campaign entitled "The Beautiful Faces of My Black People" with the aim of encouraging Afro-Colombians to proudly self-identify as such, with slogans such as "You count! Let yourself be counted!" The movement was even able to convince the DANE to pay for the television and radio spots needed to mass-produce their campaign. It was a decisive moment in which diverse social movements had to come to an agreement about the notion of race, which was no longer tied to questions like culture and geographic location and began to mean something broader, something understood in terms of a shared history.[8] As a result, the 2005 census included both "culture" and "physical traits" among the self-identification criteria, reflecting the tension over whether race should be understood exclusively in either "cultural" or "biological" terms, or a combination of the two.

The process of formulating this new question involved a dialogue among DANE representatives, academics, and members of social movements. These actors began a

[6] United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, Concluding Observations: Colombia, UN Doc. CERD/C/304/Add. 1 (1996), para. 6.

[7] United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, Ninth Periodic Report of States Parties Due in 1998: Addendum; Colombia, UN Doc. CERD/C/332/Add. 1 (1998), para. 81

[8] The campaign was successfully replicated in Panama for the census of May 2010. For an exhaustive analysis of the campaign, see Paschel (2013)

permanent debate with regard to the conceptual and operational obstacles that could impede the "adequate characterization" of the population. Spaces for dialogue and negotiation were also sponsored by international bodies such as the World Bank, the Inter-American Development Bank, and the United Nations Population Fund: the first international "Everyone Counts" ("Todos Contamos") convening in 2000 in Cartagena marked a milestone in the collection of ethnic and racial statistics in the region. Thus, the following census, conducted in 2005, was the product of a long process of negotiations, seminars, workshops, focus groups, experimental censuses, and pilot tests.

The new census, however, did not resolve the dispute between the Colombian government and Afro-Colombian activists. A last-minute adjustment to the survey question and reports of a series of technical and logistical errors in the census collection rekindled the fight (Rodríguez-Garavito et al. 2009). The decision to remove *moreno* as a possible response—which likely led to the underreporting in the Caribbean Coast—was perhaps what most concerned the Afro-Colombian movement. The DANE confined its response to pointing to the "technical inconvenience that would be caused by including [the moreno] category within the question on ethnic self-identification, as it would run the risk of over counting due to the imprecision of the concept, which is not of specific use for Afro-descendants" (Estupiñán 2006). Some were worried about undercounting while others feared over counting. And while the new figure recorded in this census (10.6%) was seven times larger than the 1993 figure, it continued to be much lower than what Afro-Colombian activists expected.

There are many reasons for the enormous variation in attempts to measure the Afro-Colombian population: from various ways of measuring the concept of "Afro-Colombianness" (in itself a disputed concept), to difficulties experienced by the Colombian state in trying to ensure that its institutions reached some of the country's most remote areas. As Tianna Paschel (2013) explains, behind each of these estimates exists complex and contentious political processes, and statistics reflect not just an attempt to "objectively" capture a population but also a range of public *interventions* that seek to redefine what

counts and what does not: from the state's century-old campaign around *mestizaje* to "the beautiful faces of my black people."

And while it is true that Afro-Colombian activists were able to increase the Afro-Colombian population's visibility in the 2005 census, it is also true that much remains to be done. After this long and arduous process, some public officials continue to deny the existence of racism. Additionally, beyond the DANE, many public agencies refuse to produce ethnic and racial statistics (under the argument that doing so would be discriminatory), which complicates the implementation of public policies necessary for correcting the historical inequalities suffered by these populations. Even in the wake of the long process that led to the 2005 census, it appears that the fight against racial discrimination in Colombia still needs "to begin by documenting and acknowledging the problem's existence" (Rodríguez-Garavito et al. 2009, 14–15).

The Dominican Case

The Dominican Republic has a very different history. As of today, it is the only country in the region that does not have an "ethnic-racial variable" in its population census. (The last census took place in 2010). It also appears to be the site of the most tragic setbacks in the struggle against racial discrimination in Latin America, after thousands of Dominicans of Haitian descent were deprived of their nationality through a series of legislative and judicial measures. The origin of this crisis—and of the Afro-descendant population's invisibility in general—goes back decades.

Since the second term of President Joaquín Balaguer (1966–1978)—the same person who deemed the "Haitian race" a threat to Dominican culture—conversations began around the need to draft a law classifying migrant workers as "foreigners in transit." The constitution in force at the time established that the children of foreigners in transit were not guaranteed birthright citizenship (under the principle of *jus soli*), thus preventing the children of Haitian workers from automatically becoming Dominican citizens. These ideas gradually began to materialize. In the 1990s, the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights began reporting that certain hospital personnel were refusing to provide live birth

records for the children of immigrants and that civil registry officials were refusing to register these children and issue birth certificates.

> The pretext used as far back as 1991 was that the parents were only in possession of a document identifying them as temporary workers, which meant that they were classified as foreigners in transit, despite the fact that they had lived in the Dominican Republic for years (Inter-American Commission on Human Rights 2015, para. 83).

The commission continued to observe such occurrences in 1997 and in 2001. Then, in 2004, a new migration law established that the children of irregular migrants could not become Dominican citizens simply by being born on Dominican soil. In 2007, the country's Central Electoral Board issued an order making it more difficult for the children of migrants to renew the documents they already had in their possession. Then, in 2010, the country's constitutional reform established that individuals born on Dominican territory had the right to acquire citizenship but excluded "the children of foreign members of diplomatic and consular delegations, and of foreigners in transit or residing illegally in the Dominican territory. Any foreigner defined as such in Dominican law is considered a person in transit."[9] This situation reached its climax in 2013, when the Constitutional Court, through Sentence 168-13, held that the children born to irregular migrants after 1929 had actually *never possessed the right to Dominican citizenship*. This ruling has had a disproportionate impact on Dominicans of Haitian descent who have lived their entire lives in the Dominican Republic, who identify as Dominicans, and who have no emotional ties with any other country. These individuals were denied, to use the words of Hannah Arendt, "the right to have rights" (Arendt 1951).

The following year, the Dominican government—recognizing the severe impact that the ruling was having on the lives of many people—began to take measures to rectify the situation, through a complex and convoluted process in which affected individuals should go before the very entities that, years earlier, had refused to renew their identity documents,

[9] Constitution, art. 18(3).

and request that they restore their citizenship. This is where the issue of statistics arises. There is no way to know the total number of affected persons. According to the 2012 National Immigrant Survey (a rare kind of survey in the region), there number of affected people is estimated to be around 210,000. But this figure "does not include the second, third or later generations of descendants of Haitian immigrants" (Inter-American Commission on Human Rights 2015, para. 265).

For the most part, the affected are *invisible*; it is hard to believe, but nobody currently knows how many people in the Dominican Republic lack citizenship. And here, underreporting not only invisibilizes but also grants *impunity*.

This invisibility is a problem that affects those who were struck by the citizenship crisis, but it also affects Afro-descendants more generally. The depth of racism in the Dominican Republic is a source of significant controversy. On multiple occasions, the government has denied the existence of racism and discrimination, pointing out the *formal* guarantees of equality that appear in domestic laws: "The Dominican State wishes to reiterate that there are no provisions in Dominican society for discrimination on racial or any other grounds. Exclusionist discrimination is not practiced and is not tolerated as a State policy."[10] But statements such as this one are increasingly indefensible in the face of pressures coming from national and international organizations.

The United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination recently voiced its strong criticism in this regard:

> The Committee is concerned about the State party's firm denial—reiterated in its dialogue with the Committee—that racial discrimination exists, especially in respect of dark-skinned people of African descent, which is in itself an obstacle to the State party's commitment to combating racism and racial discrimination. The Committee notes that the terms *indio-claro* (light-skinned Indian) and *indio-oscuro* (dark-skinned Indian), which continue to be used, fail to reflect the ethnic situation in the

[10] United Nations Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, *List of Issues in Relation to the Fourth Periodic Report of the Dominican Republic: Addendum; Replies of the Dominican Republic to the List of Issues,* UN Doc. E/C.12/DOM/Q/4/Add.1 (2016), para. 30.

country and render invisible the dark-skinned population of African descent[11].

Moreover, the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights has found evidence of Dominican authorities using racial profiling to discriminate against people of Haitian descent given that that such profiling is based on "discriminatory criteria, such as physical appearance, the way of talking, skin color, language, surnames or origin of parents" (Inter-American Commission on Human Rights 2015, para. 258).

Institutional settings such as these have been essential, though insufficient, for allowing Dominican civil society organizations to make their voices heard and to challenge the dominant narratives promoted by the country's establishment.

> The [Inter-American Commission on Human Rights] received extensive information about the existence of prejudice and racial discrimination against blacks in the Dominican Republic, whether of Haitian origin or not, which is deeply rooted in Dominican society and is seen in such areas as language, interpersonal relations, and prototypes of social aesthetics and physical beauty, among others. This is reflected in the intersection of various forms of discrimination against the Dominican population of Haitian descent, on the one hand based on the resistance to the "blackness" inherent in Dominican society and, on the other hand, based on a rejection of the Haitian population owing to the ideology of anti-Haitianism (Inter-American Commission on Human Rights 2015, para. 363).

These political pressures play a role in the controversy concerning the collection of ethnic and racial statistics. The "ethnic-racial variable" has not been included in the Dominican Republic's censuses since 1960 (Oficina Nacional de Estadística)[12]. For the 2010 population census, international pressures were again unsuccessful. At the time, the census director, Francisco Cáceres, claimed that it was impossible for Dominicans to self-

[11] United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, *Concluding Observations: Dominican Republic*, UN Doc. CERD/C/DOM/CO/13-14 (2013), para. 7.

[12] Another example of how racial identity is intermingled with national identity in the Dominican Republic can be seen in the census of 1981, where census takers had to note whether the respondent was Dominican, Haitian, or another nationality "according to their physical characteristics and accent" (Oficina Nacional de Estadística 2013, 17)

identify in racial terms. He argued that Dominicans tend to assume that anyone with an education or a prestigious job cannot be black and that anti-Haitianism causes Dominicans to identify with whatever classification puts more distance between themselves and their neighboring country (Loveman 2014, 296)[13]. For Cáceres, including this kind of question in the census would yield a "fictitious" image of the country, and attempts to shed light on the Afro-descendant population would have the opposite effect of making them even *more invisible*. Cáceres—who himself identifies as "black"—thus preferred that the Afro-descendant population remain invisible because attempting to do otherwise would produce "incorrect" statistics[14].

Meanwhile, domestic and international groups continue to push to increase the visibility of the Afro-descendant population, and it is uncertain if the situation will change for the next census. The United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, for example, "regrets that the most recent census carried out by the National Office of Statistics in 2010 did not gather information on the ethnicity or color of the population,"[15] a concern reiterated by the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights in 2015, and the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights in 2016. And at the domestic level, even the National Statistics Office has begun to acknowledge the problem:

> Not having this tool represents a danger to the improvements in human and social development, as the particular characteristics of certain ethnic groups are made statistically invisible. This results in the inequitable distribution of social benefits and a reduced quality of life of people who, furthermore, on account of being Afro-descendants or members of some other ethnic group, are subject to racial

[13] Nonetheless, there is evidence that in recent years, many young middle-class Dominicans are increasingly self-identifying as *mulatos* (Telles and Paschel 2014, 888).

[14] Advocates of "The Beautiful Faces of My Black People" campaign in Colombia shared this same concern, but they also saw the importance of achieving a certain level of visibility, as imperfect as it might be.

[15] United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, *Concluding Observations: Dominican Republic*, UN Doc. CERD/C/DOM/CO/13-14 (2013), para. 13.

discrimination and prejudice (Oficina Nacional de Estadística 2013, 7).

These Dominican authorities are beginning to feel left behind with regards to the steady progress being made in the rest of the region. This is why they are urging to "bridge the gap with regard to other countries, as well as the drawbacks created by societies that have been characterized by their historical denial of their ethnic and racial diversity" (Oficina Nacional de Estadística 2013, 22). It is therefore possible that the steady pressure of Afro-Dominican activists and international bodies will lead to change. Perhaps in the near future the country will begin to acknowledge the invisible populations it has tried so hard to hide.

Some inequalities are more visible than others

How to align the politics of numbers with the fight against inequality

The examples of Colombia and the Dominican Republic lead us to a general question about the relationship between inequality and statistical visibility. Why are some inequalities more visible than others? Why are Afro-descendants in Colombia somewhat more visible than those in the Dominican Republic? Perhaps the answer is brazenly simple*: visibility depends on power relationships*. Racial inequality in both countries is the reflection of distinct processes of racial oppression. Colombian Afro-descendants are now more visible precisely because they have been able to tilt the scales of power a bit more in their favor. First, by pressuring the Colombian state to make certain commitments and, second, by providing alternatives to the twentieth-century narrative of *mestizaje* and postcolonial colorblindness. Meanwhile, Dominican Afro-descendants remain largely invisible because they have had a more difficult time tipping the scales.

When states *choose ignorance*—when they explicitly deny the existence of racism and refuse to collect data that make their Afro-descendant populations visible—we have a situation that some call the "zero level" in the realization of the right to be free from discrimination (Rodríguez-Garavito et al. 2009). In these cases, civil society is tasked with pressuring their government to acknowledge and document the problem; and to do this, civil society must rely on legal and mediatic resources at the domestic and international

levels. The struggle for the collection of ethnic and racial statistics has been instrumental for the symbolic and material empowerment of marginalized populations.

At this point, some readers might be tempted to conclude that statistics are *just* a power game: a political instrument used in a strategic fashion by governments and certain interest groups. And there is a kernel of truth in this statement. Numbers *intervene* in the social world they attempt to depict; they cause people to think and act differently (Espeland and Stevens 2008). Thus, it's impossible for us to "correctly" portray the social world through numbers, as these numbers are already part of that world. Taking a metaphor from photography, we cannot position ourselves outside the pictures we take.

The task of "correctly measuring" ethnic and racial groups in a given country is one that dramatically blurs the boundaries between the technical and the political. The number of Afro-Colombians registered in the 2005 census was influenced by the historical narrative of a mestizo nation but also by many other interventions, including "The Beautiful Faces of My Black People" campaign. For those of us who work with numbers, this realization resembles a bucket of cold water thrown at our faces. We could conclude, as Cáceres in the Dominican Republic did, that these figures are plagued by methodological weaknesses and that it is preferable not to have them at all. But in doing so, we would be adopting a very narrow view of what is meant by "objectivity" in numbers.

The objectivity of numbers does not rest entirely in their ability to authoritatively capture a reality that's *out there*. The production of numbers follows a process with highly structured rules that are shared worldwide. The producers of numbers abide by these rules and relinquish control over what they can say. In other words, I can *trust* numbers produced halfway across the world because, while they may be imperfect, I know that they are far from being arbitrary[16]. It may be conceptually challenging to agree on the best way to measure race but, once we have performed the measurement, it is difficult to point at someone and accuse that person of lying.

This is the notion of objectivity we are left with, and it's the best we can hope for. It

[16] This is what Theodore Porter (1996) calls the "mechanical objectivity" of quantification.

allows us to think critically about the numbers we use. Thanks to this understanding of objectivity, come to the realization that fighting against inequality will require some people to engage in a constant effort to question the validity and reliability of statistical data, why we decide to collect certain data (or not), and how we do so.

I wish to conclude by pointing out that the fight against inequality is also necessary to *improve* the objectivity of the numbers we use. I know this to be true because it is something that, to a certain extent, we are already doing. Information from surveys and population censuses is no longer used (at least in most of the world) to exercise exclusionary and repressive control over societies. It has become part of the public domain. It is *ours*, and we must continually use it to ensure that it stays this way. From a historical perspective, this reflects a momentous shift in the balance of power: civil society organizations, backed by international bodies, use this information themselves to exert a certain form of power over states.

In other words, it is clear that behind the production and consumption of any number we'll find a whole set of stakeholders. Thus, the best way to align the fight against inequality with the politics of numbers is to create a solid institutional architecture that underpins and provides legitimacy to the entire measurement process. Seen this way, the production of statistical information becomes an issue of institutional design, such that different interest groups can coordinate and impose limits on the claims of others. I'm describing, of course, a system of checks and balances.

Thus, the link between inequality and statistical visibility—complex though it may be—can be summed up simply: they are two sides of the same coin, and both are rooted in asymmetric and enduring power relations. We will have to advocate, among other things, for national statistical agencies to strengthen their capabilities and commitments to visibilize marginalized groups. New participatory settings will be created, following the continuous efforts from social movements in domestic and international grounds.