

Anders Bright

April 22, 2015

Godden 1010-01

Baseball in Latin America: Old Story, New Face

Societies work as sieves, removing or at least clearly defining what is viewed as unacceptable behavior through popular consensus. When one group clearly benefits through the exploitation of another less powerful population, however, the system breaks down, and truly monstrous behavior can carry on unmolested. It is this dynamic that has allowed Major League Baseball, an American cultural juggernaut, to systematically exploit Latin American countries in order to produce professional baseball talent as cheaply as possible. I will argue that Major League Baseball has developed a parasitic colonial-like apparatus for the purpose of importing baseball talent, reaping large rewards, while leaving Latin America little if any tangible benefits. I hope to illuminate a system of exploitation that is largely out-of-sight from the American population. Although the MLB actively recruits talent from many Latin American countries, I will focus my analysis on the MLB's relationship with the Dominican Republic, because it produces the highest amount of MLB players per capita of any Latin American country, and is the location where the most egregiously exploitive activities have taken place.

Baseball has become an increasingly globalized game and business. At the start of the 2014 Major League season, two hundred and twenty four players, or 26.3 percent of roster spots, were occupied by players born outside the United States of America ("2014 Opening Day Rosters"). In 2014, the Dominican Republic provided Major League Baseball with eighty-three players, the most of any country besides the United States ("2014 Opening Day Rosters"). Venezuela, another Latin American country, produced fifty-nine players, the second highest total

behind the Dominican Republic (“2014 Opening Day Rosters”). For the last decade, over eighty percent of foreign-born players on Major League teams have hailed from Latin America (Marcano 91). The minor leagues have seen an even bigger influx of Latin born players, and in 2000 Peter Gammons, a highly regarded baseball analyst, stated that “forty percent of minor league players [are] foreign born,” and these were overwhelmingly from Latin America (3). From the perspective of Major League Baseball fans, the MLB’s relationship with Latin born players appears symbiotic; players from the Dominican Republic, stars like Jose Reyes and Adrian Beltre, make exorbitant amounts of money while MLB franchises reap the benefits of their outstanding play, through merchandise sales and higher game attendance. Only a miniscule percentage of Latin born players become professional players, however, let alone reach the Major Leagues, the highest level of the sport. What is more, an institutionalized system of economic exploitation, set in place by MLB franchises, has developed in countries like the Dominican Republic, specially designed to produce as much baseball talent as possible, as cheaply as possible. Latin baseball players are sold to the highest bidder (an MLB franchise) and exported from their country of origin. In the late twentieth and twenty-first century, the MLB’s relationship with Latin America has come to resemble the mercantilism of the colonial era.

To understand the current relationship between the MLB and countries like the Dominican Republic, you must understand the history of economic exploitation by external powers in said countries. During the colonial period, Spain kept a strangle hold on the economies of its overseas territories, forcing all of the resources produced in colonies like Santo Domingo (Dominican Republic) to be shipped back to Spanish ports (*Sugarball* 10). In the late eighteenth century, the Dominican Republic’s sugar industry took a major hit as Spanish overlords had trouble finding new markets for its colonial exports (10). In the late 1800’s after the Dominican

Republic had gained its independence from Spain, it sought international investment to revitalize its dilapidated sugar industry (12). By 1900 the United States was so heavily invested in the Dominican economy, that US businesses controlled most infrastructure that aided in the transport of sugar, including “railroads and port facilities” (12). The Dominican Republic was so indebted to overseas businesses, that it ceased taxing American companies, and in 1916 “U.S. marines invaded the country on the pretext of securing the collection of customs revenues due the American government” (12).

Several aspects of the colonial and neo-colonial economies of the Dominican Republic are eerily similar to contemporary baseball business operations in the country. Throughout the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries, the Dominican Republic’s economy was highly dependent on the export of sugar, leading to the underdevelopment of other industries. Today, almost all Dominican teenage males focus on baseball development, often foregoing their educations, in the pursuit of what many see as their only escape from poverty. American companies (MLB franchises) also control almost every aspect of the development process, investing in academies that train promising young players. Although a select number of Dominican players become stars, the majority of aspiring players “are left in the dust”, and “an estimated ninety-seven percent of these boys get left behind” often without the most rudimentary level of education (Wasch 3). As Samuel Regalado, an expert on Latin baseball, has argued, “The export of Latin born baseball players from countries like the Dominican Republic “embod[ies] many of the features of the neocolonialist tradition” (Regalado 9).

The evolution of baseball in the Dominican Republic is deeply tied to historical instability in the region, and the influence of colonial powers. Baseball was used as an imperial tool by the United States, introducing the game to countries around the world. Albert G.

Spalding, a major league pitcher from 1871 to 1878, and founder of a sporting goods company with the same name, summed up the imperial role baseball served when he said baseball was meant “to follow the flag” (*Dominican Baseball* 11). In 1913, the United States minister to the Dominican Republic praised the perceived pacifying effect baseball had on the Dominican population writing to The Secretary of State that “men are leaving the plazas where they were in the habit of congregating and talking revolution and are resorting to the ball fields” (11). In reality, baseball served as an emblem of national pride for the Dominican Republic, a country that had seen so much turmoil throughout its existence. In 1914, when a Dominican team beat an American team consisting of navy sailors in an exhibition game on the island, it was celebrated as an achievement over unwelcome outsiders (11).

The Dominican Republic remained an afterthought for most Major League franchises until the 1950’s when the Cuban Revolution and subsequent trade embargo forced Major League scouts to relinquish the foothold they had built in Cuba, and instead turn to the Dominican Republic in search of cheap talent (37). This spelled disaster for amateur and professional baseball within the Dominican Republic. Major League baseball pressured the Dominican professional league into moving its season to the winter, allowing Dominican players to play in both in the same year (38). Over the years, as MLB salaries have grown, fewer and fewer top players have returned to the Dominican Republic to play in their home league, either due to fear of injury, or as a result of managerial pressure not to do so (38). Traditional amateur leagues, once funded by major companies, also disappeared as American run academies took over the responsibility of player development within the Dominican Republic. (39) As Dominican baseball became more commercialized at the hands of Major League franchises, baseball lost some of its cultural meaning in the Dominican Republic. Much like the Dominican’s colonial

and neo-colonial past, American interests now control the process and institutions by which Dominican players, a commodity, are trained, developed, and signed.

In the 1980s and 1990s, the system of baseball recruitment in Latin America was unregulated by the United States government, and the Dominican government did nothing to curb apparent abuses. The development and subsequent export of Dominican baseball players to the United States is a commodity chain (*Chain Reaction* 28). Much of the exploitation and abuse that occurs in the development process arises because at each level of the commodity chain, the people in charge attempt to reap as large a profit as possible, usually by cutting production costs. In other commodity chains, such as the manufacturing of fabric, cutting corners to reduce costs results in a less durable product. In the production of baseball players, humans are the commodities being produced, and attempts at cutting costs are often detrimental to the players' physical or mental health. The first step in this commodity chain is the only level that is headed by predominately Dominican born individuals. *Buscones* (derived from the Spanish word *buscar* or to search) scour the small island in search of talented young baseball players (*Dominican Baseball* 69). *Buscones* "find, train, feed, and financially support young prospects", and in return, are paid handsomely for it, often upwards of 35% of the player's first contract (69). Until recently the role *buscones* played was unregulated, and players as young as thirteen were seen as prime investments, because MLB franchises prefer to sign younger players (Marcano 91). Steroid use and age fraud also occurs semi-regularly while players are under the wing of *buscones* (Schmidt). In 2010, thirteen of the top forty Dominican prospects failed drug tests, and ten of the players were required to take DNA tests in order to verify their age (Schmidt). In a cutthroat environment in which adolescents compete with other youngsters for a select number of contracts, players will do almost anything to gain an advantage. In one of the most harrowing

admissions in recent memory, a prominent *buscone* named Victor Baez admitted that he “routinely injected his teenage players with Vitamin B12 because he could not afford to feed them meat” (Schmidt).

When Dominican players reach the age of seventeen, they take part in open tryouts run by Major League baseball academies located in the Dominican Republic. If Major League scouts agree to sign a player, they are usually given a contract averaging between \$4,000 and \$8,000 (Marcano 67). Young signees are expected to play in Dominican summer leagues, and if they impress scouts, they are given minor league contracts. Players are often presented contracts that are in English, and have no choice but to sign them without realizing what they stipulate. In the case of Alexis Quiroz, a budding Venezuelan player, his time at the academy was a horrifying experience (81). After signing a contract with the Chicago Cubs in the 1980s, Alexis was quickly flown to the Dominican Republic to play for the Cubs’ Dominican summer team (97). When veterans of the team informed Alexis that the academy was referred to as Vietnam he felt a sense of foreboding, but nothing could prepare him for what lay in store (97). Over the next two months, Alexis lived in an un-air-conditioned barrack with over two dozen ball players. They did not have access to running water, had to walk over a mile to bath in a local river, were given two meals a day usually consisting of a piece of fruit and some rice, and were fined by a drunk coach for every error they made in the field (77). After the season Alexis was unceremoniously informed that he had been cut from the team, which came to a surprise to Alexis who believed he had signed a three-year contract (98).

Although this is an extreme example of the exploitive nature of Dominican baseball academies, Alexis’s story captures the little regard MLB franchises show for their Latin American signees. In the United States, it often takes six figures to sign a quality player out of

college, and in the Dominican Republic, a player with a similar skillset can be signed for four thousand dollars. The drive to sign as many cheap prospects as possible has led many experts on Dominican baseball to refer to the second half of the 20th century as the “quality in quantity era” (Wasch 125). Many of the questionable practices administered by the academies are the result of baseball franchises putting a premium on natural talent over development. Instead of focusing on developing young talent, many rogue scouts instead focus their attention on “player poaching”, illegally signing and taking highly valued prospects away from the academy they originally signed with (89). Bob Considine, a twentieth-century American sports writer, went as far as describing Joe Cambria, a scout in Latin America, as an “ivory hunter” (Regalado 15). The dehumanization of Dominican players at the hands of Major League run baseball academies is a conscious choice to view these individuals as inputs for a commodity chain, rather than human beings who are negatively impacted by a system designed to produce Major League talent as cheaply as possible.

What makes Major League Baseball’s mercantilist apparatus in Latin America increasingly monstrous is the misconceptions about the system in both the Dominican Republic and the United States. In reality, the MLB has a monopoly on the work force in the Dominican Republic. By signing contracts, Dominican born players are restricted from playing for other teams, and have little means to protest against exploitive behavior (9). In 1984 Major League Baseball attempted to address the prevalence of child labor that took place in their training facilities in The Dominican Republic, when the Commissioner instituted the seventeen-year-old rule, prohibiting the signing of players under the age of seventeen (17). Although this rule curbed some of the most egregious violations of child labor laws, underage players are still routinely signed and age fraud is a huge problem (19). The United States government has largely turned a

blind eye to institutionalized mal-treatment of Latin American players, but the Department of Labor has instituted a quota system by supplying a set number of visas to MLB franchises. This is reminiscent of colonial measures taken to protect domestic business interests; in this case the goal is to protect American labor, or more specifically, American born players (“Baseball as Underdevelopment” 909).

Most American baseball fans are aware of the impoverished environment from which Dominican MLB players have risen. Far from acknowledging the problems existing within the current system of Latin player development, most fans applaud the opportunity the MLB offers these players. Colloquially known as “America’s pastime”, baseball seems to provide a version of the American dream to up-and-coming Dominican prospects. The stark reality is, however, that baseball only provides about two thousand jobs for the island, at the cost of “tens of thousands of Dominican boys not receiv[ing] a formal education” (Wasch 3). While American audiences goggle at the multimillion-dollar contracts signed by Dominican superstars, thousands more young Dominican boys are unable to escape poverty.

For Dominicans, Major League Baseball is a paradox. In a country where the poverty rate is above fifty percent, baseball is an opportunity to escape poverty, when often the only other occupation is sugar cane harvesting (*Dominican Baseball* 8). Almost every Dominican personally knows at least one player who has played professionally in the United States, and Dominican born Major League players are treated as royalty in their hometowns. Although a handful of individuals have reaped great rewards by reaching the Major Leagues, Dominican society as a whole has suffered as whole generations of Dominican male youth have forgone educations, in the pursuit of wealth and fame.

Baseball once served a cultural rallying-point for the Dominican Republic, as it is one of the only areas in which Dominicans are superior at compared to Americans. Starting in the 1950's, baseball morphed into a neo-colonial enterprise, as MLB franchises realized the potential of untapped Dominican talent. Existing as an unregulated hegemon, Major League Baseball has destroyed the cultural relevance of baseball in the Dominican, as domestic amateur baseball and professional leagues have become obsolete. Major League franchises have taken over most institutions that carry out player development in the country, a phenomenon reminiscent of the Dominican's storied past. In the United States, where baseball is synonymous with American culture and ideals, the system of Latin American development has come to resemble dark elements of America's neo-colonial past.

Works Cited

- "2014 Opening Day Rosters Feature 224 Players Born Outside the U.S." *MLB.com*. Major League Baseball, 1 Apr. 2014. Web. 22 Apr. 2015.
- "Baseball as Underdevelopment: The Political-Economy of Sport in the Dominican Republic." *Sport in Society* 10.6 (2007): 896-915. Web. 22 Apr. 2015.
- J., Marcano Guevara Arturo, and David P. Fidler. *Stealing Lives: The Globalization of Baseball and the Tragic Story of Alexis Quiroz*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 2002. Print.
- Klein, Alan. "Chain Reaction: Neoliberal Exceptions to Global Commodity Chains in Dominican Baseball." *International Review For The Sociology Of Sport* 47.1 (2012): 27-42. Web.
- . *Dominican Baseball: New Pride, Old Prejudice*. Print.
- . *Sugarball: The American Game, the Dominican Dream*. New Haven, CT: Yale UP, 1991. Print.
- Regalado, Samuel O. "'Latin Players on the Cheap': Professional Baseball Recruitment in Latin America and the Neocolonialist Tradition." *Indiana Journal of Global Legal Studies* 8.1 (2000): 9-20. Web. 22 Apr. 2015.
- Schmidt, Michael S. "Less Demand for Dominicans as M.L.B. Scrutiny Increases." *The New York Times*. The New York Times, 09 Oct. 2010. Web. 22 Apr. 2015.
- Wasch, Adam. "Children Left Behind: The Effect of Major League Baseball on Education in the Dominican Republic." *Texas Review of Entertainment and Sports Law* 11.1 (2009): 99-124. Web. 22 Apr. 2015.