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The Limits of Racial Domination: Plebeian Society in Colonial Mexico City, 1660-1720, by R. Douglas Cope

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The Limits of Racial Domination: Plebeian Society in Colonial Mexico City, 1660-1720. By R. Douglas Cope. (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1994. xiii + 220 pp., introduction, figures, tables, conclusion, appendix, notes, bibliography, index. \$48.50 cloth, \$17.95 paper.)

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Relying largely on quantitative analysis and a tightly constructed theoretical focus, R. Douglas Cope explores the process by which Spain managed to maintain its hegemony in a multiethnic society without overt force or coercion. In particular, he examines the relationship between class and race in Mexico City in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, an era when the *sistema de castas*, an elite-inspired ranking of ethnic groups based on one's proportion of Spanish blood, was at its most developed and mature stage. Unlike some historians of colonial race relations, Cope does not believe that hegemony was sustained by a racial ideology designed to divide the lower social groups and co-opt the more successful castas or mixed bloods. Inspired by the studies of Inga Clendinnen, Irene Silverblatt, and Steve Stern, which afford agency to Latin American subordinate groups, Cope claims that the poor of Mexico City, the class-conscious plebeians, did not passively accept elite racial ideology and contested efforts to impose ethnic identity through the creation of the *sistema de castas*. By rejecting the official racial hierarchy, the urban working classes redefined race on their own terms and thereby sabotaged elite strategem to divide and conquer the potentially rebellious masses of Mexico's populous capital.

If social control was not maintained through the internalization of racial ideology or the coercive mechanisms of the colonial state, then how was Spanish domination sustained? Cope believes the answer is found in the urban labor market, specifically in patron-client networks that created a dependency on and hence validation of a system that, by encouraging a privatization of interests, promoted divisions among the poor. The workplace was where the Spanish elite controlled their employees in order to limit the ability of the urban poor to challenge Hispanic domination. At times, such as in the riot of 1692, the working classes managed to overcome such divisions and create a "feeling of brotherhood" and a "reign of goodwill" that transcended racial lines and pitted plebeians against the wealthy, but the colonial state adeptly exposed fissures among the ethnically mixed poor and thus survived this potential threat to Spanish authority.

In attempting to explain the hegemony of the colonial ruling class, Cope offers valuable insight into some aspects of working-class life and urban race relations. For evidence of plebeian rejection of elite racial ideology, he creatively analyzes marriage and burial records to demonstrate that

very few of the poor attempted to improve their racial status by “passing,” that is claiming affiliation with a more socially acceptable, as defined by the *sistema*, ethnic group. Race did matter for the working classes, however, but not in accordance with elite expectations, as social networks among the poor were delineated along either an Indian or African axis. Cope also illustrates that the urban patronage system made limited degrees of social mobility possible, albeit within a context that, through certain monetary arrangements, enhanced plebeian dependency on their social superiors. Of particular value to ethnohistorians is the analysis of working-class naming practices and kinship meaning.

These and other splendid glimpses into colonial urban society are occasionally eclipsed by the author’s provocative but ultimately deterministic thesis. Placing the burden of social control and resulting Hispanic hegemony on labor relations ignores other informal and formal means, both material and ideological, of sustaining the dominant groups. Though Cope, in keeping with his resistance paradigm, claims that the urban poor used judicial institutions solely to manipulate the elite, other studies have shown that workers often went voluntarily to the municipal courts of Mexico City and other Spanish American cities to resolve intragroup conflict. And while patron-client relationships may have played a critical role in the colonial countryside, such networks were not as extensive in an urban environment in which recurrent labor surplus meant that many of the poor, whenever they could find employment, worked as independent wage laborers or as service providers in an informal economy free from direct patron supervision and control.

Also overstated is the primacy placed on class and lower-class consciousness in a seventeenth-century setting. Cope bolsters such arguments on claims that are either dubious, maintaining that there was no racial prejudice or discrimination among the plebeians themselves, or contradictory, documenting that the preponderance of rioters in 1692 were Indians, not a racially balanced cross-section of an alleged working-class brotherhood.

At times the data are forced into a rigid, one-dimensional framework that obscures the social nuances and complexities the author endeavors to examine. As such, Cope’s controversial interpretations will likely provoke vigorous debate among scholars interested in the relationship of dominant and subaltern groups and in the means of creating and sustaining the position of the former.