Fall 10-1-1996

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

Michael C. Scardaville
University of South Carolina - Columbia, mscardaville@sc.edu

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

M. C. Scardaville, *University of South Carolina*

Relying largely on quantitative analysis and a tightly constructed theoreti-
cal 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 Silver-
blatt, and Steve Stern, which afford agency to Latin American subordinate
groups, Cope claims that the poor of Mexico City, the class-conscious ple-
beians, 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 work-
place 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 good-
will" 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 ideol-
ogy, 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 determinis-
tic thesis. Placing the burden of social control and resulting Hispanic hege-
mony 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 supervi-
sion and control.

Also overstated is the primacy placed on class and lower-class con-
sciousness 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 contradic-
tory, documenting that the preponderance of rioters in 1692 were Indians,
not a racially balanced cross-section of an alleged working-class brother-
hood.

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 domi-
nant and subaltern groups and in the means of creating and sustaining the
position of the former.