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The Limits Of Racial Domination: Plebeian Society In Colonial Mexico City, 1660–1720 (Writing)



Synopsis

In this distinguished contribution to Latin American colonial history, Douglas Cope draws upon a wide variety of sources-including Inquisition and court cases, notarial records and parish registers-to challenge the traditional view of castas (members of the caste system created by Spanish overlords) as rootless, alienated, and dominated by a desire to improve their racial status. On the contrary, the castas, Cope shows, were neither passive nor ruled by feelings of racial inferiority; indeed, they often modified or even rejected elite racial ideology. Castas also sought ways to manipulate their social "superiors" through astute use of the legal system. Cope shows that social control by the Spaniards rested less on institutions than on patron-client networks linking individual patricians and plebeians, which enabled the elite class to co-opt the more successful castas. The book concludes with the most thorough account yet published of the Mexico City riot of 1692. This account illuminates both the shortcomings and strengths of the patron-client system. Spurred by a corn shortage and subsequent famine, a plebeian mob laid waste much of the central city. Cope demonstrates that the political situation was not substantially altered, however; the patronage system continued to control employment and plebeians were largely left to bargain and adapt, as before. A revealing look at the economic lives of the urban poor in the colonial era, *The Limits of Racial Domination* examines a period in which critical social changes were occurring. The book should interest historians and ethnohistorians alike.

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Customer Reviews

"A superb book, of obvious interest not only to Latin Americanists but also to those who study race relations in a hemispheric context."--Frederick P. Bowser, Stanford University

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In my study of the *Limpieza de Sangre* in early modern Spain and America my Professor recommended this book. I was not sure why at first, once I read it then I understood. Cope, as the title suggests shows the limits to the *limpieza de Sangre* within south American society. Although the book is, I must admit dry, still provides valuable insight as to the life of peoples within Spanish colonial society. He shows how race was perceived, and it is not as simple as you think. As well he demonstrates just how complex the ideas of race were. Through marriage records as to who married into what group, endogamy and interracial and how people perceived themselves and others. Cope has lots of information, yet tends to overlap ideas and go back and fourth between facts and ideas to link them, thus making some of it very complex (ideal for a complex subject). I would suggest while reading it to keep in mind the difference between people in urban and rural areas and the effect on perceptions and emotions to ideas of race, cope looks more to the urban rather than rural. Either way, the information he gives and the picture he paints is impressive and thus makes the book so great, showing just how complex society was and how the *Limpieza de Sangre* effected all peoples.

great job

Cope provides a meticulous and empirically well-founded exploration of the physical and social conditions in late colonial Mexico. His study considers both the efficacies and inefficacies of a caste system that required an exact distribution of rights, privileges and obligations along racial lines. The result is an account that not only establishes the ways in which race constrained the life opportunities of individuals in colonial society, but also the ways in which the characteristics of this

system were manipulated by those in power and by those seeking upward mobility. While the European elites used phenotypic qualities to separate themselves from the rest of the Mexican masses, those with aspirations of moving up the social ladder could do so through intermarriage, economic success or other status-enhancing methods. Particularly important is Cope's investigation of the patron-client relationship. In effect, because the most disadvantaged portions of society relied on the elites (their employers and landlords) for survival, it was impossible for these lower castes to rebel against the system and sustain themselves at the same time. Such a circumstance kept the masses in check and elite power secure. In many ways the patron-client dynamic, and the caste system on the whole, still characterize Mexican society today.

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Very interesting book. I enjoyed reading the cases entailed within this book and learned some practices I was not aware of. Great for researchers like myself.

Well executed and much necessary study

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