



Cafe Con Leche: Race, Class and National Image in Venezuela

Winthrop R. Wright

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For over a hundred years, Venezuelans have referred to themselves as a *café con leche* (coffee with milk) people. This colorful expression well describes the racial composition of Venezuelan society, in which European, African, and Indian peoples have intermingled to produce a population in which almost everyone is of mixed blood. It also expresses a popular belief that within their blended society Venezuelans have achieved a racial democracy in which people of all races live free from prejudice and discrimination. Whether or not historical facts actually support this popular perception is the question Winthrop Wright explores in this study.

Wright's research suggests that, contrary to popular belief, blacks in Venezuela have not enjoyed the full benefits of racial democracy. He finds that their status, even after the abolition of slavery in 1854, remained low in the minds of Venezuelan elites, who idealized the European somatic type and viewed blacks as inferior. Indeed, in an effort to whiten the population, Venezuelan elites promoted European immigration and blocked the entry of blacks and Asians during the early twentieth century.

These attitudes remained in place until the 1940s, when the populist Acción Democrática party (AD) challenged the elites' whitening policies. Since that time, blacks have made significant strides and have gained considerable political power. But, as Wright reveals, other evidence suggests that most remain social outcasts and have not accumulated significant wealth. The popular perception of racial harmony in Venezuela hides the fact of ongoing discrimination.

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