

DIFFERENCES OF PERSPECTIVE: AN EXAMINATION OF RACISM AND ETHNIC MINORITIES IN THE BOLIVARIAN REPUBLIC OF VENEZUELA

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Throughout their history, all states must address the issues of ethnicity, culture and racism in their societies. Though states may think of themselves as ruled by a dominant culture and ethnic group, the inflow of immigrants into a state will always shift this composition and create new issues that need to be addressed. Immigration to Venezuela since WWII has added the country to the group of states in Latin America who have seen these profound changes in the ethnic composition of their society,⁴⁴ and these changes often lead to ethnic tensions and racism. Though Venezuela generally claims there is no racism to be found within its borders, a closer examination reveals that examples of racism are found in both the media and the attitudes of the elite, directed mainly at those with Native or Afro-Venezuelan blood. Though efforts have been made by the government in Venezuela, since the abolition of slavery, to improve social conditions and remove racism, issues brought to the forefront with the election of President Hugo Chavez clearly suggest that more needs to be done.

This paper discusses groups in terms of ethnicity or race. The terms 'race' and 'ethnicity' both relate to the backgrounds of certain individuals. Where ethnicity refers to a "social construction that is central to the identification of difference and sameness," race generally refers to biological differences that can be found among individuals.⁴⁵ Both are "contextual, situational, multi-vocal".⁴⁶

Racism is the other major term that will be addressed in this paper. As used by Hernan Vera, 'racism' refers to a "socially organized set of attributes, ideas, and practices that denies people of colour and ethnic minorities the dignity, opportunity, freedom, and rewards that a nation has to offer the dominant segments of the population."⁴⁷ This is the definition I will be using, but it is interesting to note Venezuelans generally use the term 'racist' in a different way, as will be discussed more in-depth later.

There are a number of ethnic groups in the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela, due in large part to the post-WWII immigrant push. However the most apparent minority groups remain the Afro-Venezuelans and Natives. Discrimination against these two groups can be traced back to the conquest and slavery of these populations, beginning in 1496.⁴⁸ African slave-trading had a very important place in European political economy during colonization and the subsequent years, and up until 1797 it brought over 100,000 Africans into Venezuela via legal or illegal routes.⁴⁹ The mass exploitation of these individuals combined with the terrible living conditions, the belief that this was their place, the abuse

⁴⁴. Magnus Mörner, "Historical Research on Race Relations in Latin America During the National Period," in *Race and Class in Latin America*, ed. Magnus Mörner (New York: Columbia University Press, 1970), 219.

⁴⁵. Peter Wade, *Race and Ethnicity in Latin America* (Chicago: Pluto Press, 1997), 16.

⁴⁶. Wade, 19.

⁴⁷. Hernán Vera, "Local Global Racism in Latin America," in *Racial and Ethnic Economic Inequality: An International Perspective*, eds. Samuel L. Meyers, Jr. and Bruce P. Corrie (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, Inc., 2006), 16.

⁴⁸. Jesús María Herrera Salas, "Ethnicity and Revolution: The Political Economy of Racism in Venezuela," *Latin American Perspectives* 32, no. 2 (2005): 72.

⁴⁹. Herrera Salas, 74.

and the neglect they experienced built the base for racism to grow on. Native groups similarly experienced mass oppression and marginalization in forms of "everyday racism" by the elite classes.⁵⁰ As this paper will demonstrate, this discrimination has lasted for centuries, beyond the official date of the abolition of slavery in Venezuela in 1854, though attempts were made to curb it.

Venezuelans today describe themselves as 'Café Con Leche', coffee with milk, which backs up their claims to 'racial democracy'.⁵¹ This description suggests that all Venezuelans are a mixture of Native, Afro-Venezuelan and European blood, though some may have more of one than another. The positive values of this mixture are endorsed in many levels of society, and are commonly presented as the basis of cultural unity and tolerance in Venezuelan society. For example, Foreign Secretary Luis Alfonso Dávila addressed the international anti-racism congress in 2001 stating that Venezuela is a proud multicultural society because of this particular mixture of races combined with different immigrant groups, and it has "created a culture of respect for differences, which has allowed us to better handle diversity. ... Venezuela wants to ... fight against racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and all other forms of intolerance that exist in the world."⁵² Thus, because of their shared, mixed heritage, certain idealistic segments of society would like to believe that ethnicity and racism are no longer an issue.

Combining this attitude with the idea of racism prevailing in Venezuela gives the Venezuelans the idea that racism no longer exists in their country. Latin American countries such as Venezuela generally define racism as the "virulent anti-black type of discrimination and segregation in the United States. By looking at the closed systems in the United States as the true racism, Latin Americans overlook the signs of discrimination in their own countries."⁵³ This difference in definition ignores the more subtle forms of discrimination that exist, such as not renting a room to someone of colour, moving to a different seat so as to be farther than someone of an ethnic minority, or general racist stereotypes. Additionally, the understanding of what it is to be 'black' is perceived differently in Venezuela and Latin America than in other parts of the world. Whereas North America perceives anyone with Negroid features to be black, Venezuelans only see those with dark, black skin to be black.⁵⁴ These different perceptions make comparison of cultural tolerance difficult and illusory.

A different definition of race may, in fact, lead to a general disregard for the existence of racism in Venezuela and Latin America. Hans Neumann, for instance, affirms that in Venezuela "race is not important in judging a person. [Here] racial discrimination is not a factor either in employment or in social or intellectual realms. ... Prejudice against someone because of the colour of his skin does not

⁵⁰. Teun A. Van Dijk, *Racism and Discourse in Spain and Latin America* (Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2005), 151.

⁵¹. Hernán Vera, "Local Global Racism in Latin America," in *Racial and Ethnic Economic Inequality: An International Perspective*, eds. Samuel L. Meyers, Jr. and Bruce P. Corrie (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, Inc., 2006), 22.

⁵². Teun A. Van Dijk, *Racism and Discourse in Spain and Latin America* (Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2005), 153-154.

⁵³. Hernán Vera, "Local Global Racism in Latin America," in *Racial and Ethnic Economic Inequality: An International Perspective*, eds. Samuel L. Meyers, Jr. and Bruce P. Corrie (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, Inc., 2006), 22.

⁵⁴. Winthrop R. Wright, "Elitist Attitudes Toward Race in Twentieth-Century Venezuela," in *Slavery and Race Relations in Latin America*, ed. Robert Brent Toplin (Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1974), 326.

exist. This is not an obstacle here as it is in other places."⁵⁵ This general idea as it exists in Venezuelan society can be traced back to a number of historical reasons, such as "a long legal tradition of equality, the rhetoric of Simón Bolívar [as will be examined later], and the fact that Venezuelan historians, unlike their Brazilian contemporaries, showed little interest in treating the black as a separate element of society after [abolition in] 1854."⁵⁶ Promoting ideas like this leads to overlooking subtler forms of racism.

One obvious place where these claims to complete ethnic tolerance and anti-racism can easily be disproved are the media. The best example of the persistence of racist attitudes in Venezuela, following the rise of Chavez, are the "racist taunts [towards him] in the media" which also extend into everyday conversation.⁵⁷ Racism towards Native and Afro-Venezuelan groups in general has also been present in the media, though it has been subtle in nature. In general, there are "few black faces (and even less indigenous ones) in the media. Television anchor persons are invariably white or off white, and so is Miss Venezuela, among many other celebrities, except for a handful of black people who confirm the rule. ... [Additionally] blacks only appeared in at most 10% of billboards, TV programs, movies, or telenovelas, and next to zero percent as main protagonists."⁵⁸ This leads to a 'whitening' of popular culture, a representation that those who are lighter are better off and more socially acceptable. For black models it is very hard to find assignments, as their African features are generally found unappealing and lead to casting in roles such as beach party scenes, a representation of sensual bodies, music, sports, and country-style scenes with poor people.⁵⁹

The attitude of the elites is another obvious example of the persistence of racism in Venezuela. The upper class in Venezuela has been involved in the denial of rights and improvements in the lives of Afro-Venezuelans and native peoples through the whole history of the country, not just in the early days of the conquest and slavery, when the living conditions and treatment of natives and Afro-Americans were clearly degrading. Even when, at key points in the history of Venezuela, there would have been clear benefits for both individuals and the state in loosening or removing the noose of slavery, the elite resisted the change. At the very beginning of the independence struggle, in the early 1800s, for instance, when the idea of incorporating black slaves into the armed forces was proposed, which would have allowed both freedom for the slaves and man power for the army, the elites in Caracas refused to cooperate for fear of losing their slaves, which led to the victory of Spain.⁶⁰ During the first half of the 19th century, it was commonly accepted that in principle slavery was an evil thing that needed to be abolished, however few thought that this should be done immediately,⁶¹ and the process was delayed

⁵⁵. Jesús María Herrera Salas, "Ethnicity and Revolution: The Political Economy of Racism in Venezuela," *Latin American Perspectives* 32, no. 2 (2005): 72.

⁵⁶. Winthrop R. Wright, "Elitist Attitudes Toward Race in Twentieth-Century Venezuela," in *Slavery and Race Relations in Latin America*, ed. Robert Brent Toplin (Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1974), 331.

⁵⁷. Teun A. Van Dijk, *Racism and Discourse in Spain and Latin America* (Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2005), 151.

⁵⁸. Teun A. Van Dijk, *Racism and Discourse in Spain and Latin America* (Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2005), 152.

⁵⁹. Van Dijk, 152.

⁶⁰. John V. Lombardi, "The Abolition of Slavery in Venezuela: A Nonevent," in *Slavery and Race Relations in Latin America*, ed. Robert Brent Toplin (Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1974), 231-232.

⁶¹. Lombardi, 241.

until 1854. These are some historical examples, however the racist attitudes of the elite towards the Native and Afro-Venezuelan people continue to the present.

Today, the lower classes including the Natives and Afro-Venezuelans "are constantly berated by the upper and middle classes ... as 'vermin,' 'mixed-breeds,' 'Indians,' 'barefoot,' and 'rabble.'"⁶² In the early 19th century, the Afro-Venezuelans were seen as an uncultured, racially inferior group by the writings of a number of Caracas-based elite.⁶³ The white, elitist position towards them is still generally not favorable, as was demonstrated during the election and current government of President Hugo Chavez, as will be discussed below. Additionally, as the media in Venezuela have generally been dominated by the power of the elite, the racist overtones there can also be traced back to this group. The prejudices have carried on from colonial experiences, and have led to arguments that blacks are disliked as much as they are because of the continual culture of poverty they live in.⁶⁴ Though such arguments provide no justification for the discrimination, they do reveal the elite's persistent racist thinking.

It is interesting at this point to note the shifting position of historical revolutionary leader Simón Bolívar on the topic of race and discrimination. At the beginning he took the position of the current Venezuelan government, one of cooperation and equality. When recruiting troops during the wars of independence and after, Bolívar encouraged the idea of racial harmony:

"Our people are neither European nor North American; they are a mixture of Africa and America rather than an emanation of Europe. ... While we have all been born of the same mother, our fathers, different in origin and blood, are foreigners, and all differ visibly as to the colour of their skin, a dissimilarity which places upon us an obligation of the greatest importance."⁶⁵

Later in his career, however, Bolívar had mixed feelings on the question of race :

"Racial 'diversity' [was] a central impediment to 'perfect' democracy. For Bolívar, the lack of virtue of Venezuela's mixed-race population counseled against an overly representative democracy, and he advocated a strong executive and hereditary peerage. Central to his argument was the premise that all people were not in fact created equal, and that the long oppressed and racially mixed population needed education before it could enjoy full citizen rights."⁶⁶

These shifting perspectives of Bolívar suggest that he understood the use and importance of cooperation and acceptance, while manpower was needed for a successful independence struggle as well as in the afterglow of success. However, when things settled down and the elitist opinions started to seep through to Simón Bolívar, he too seem to have become less firm in his anti-racist stand.

One should stress, however, that the Venezuelan government has made great strides since the days of slavery in terms of the official position on equality and anti-racism, which has been continued by

⁶². Jesús María Herrera Salas, "Ethnicity and Revolution: The Political Economy of Racism in Venezuela," *Latin American Perspectives* 32, no. 2 (2005): 72.

⁶³. Winthrop R. Wright, "Elitist Attitudes Toward Race in Twentieth-Century Venezuela," in *Slavery and Race Relations in Latin America*, ed. Robert Brent Toplin (Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1974), 334.

⁶⁴. Winthrop R. Wright, "Elitist Attitudes Toward Race in Twentieth-Century Venezuela," in *Slavery and Race Relations in Latin America*, ed. Robert Brent Toplin (Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1974), 327.

⁶⁵. Wright, 333.

⁶⁶. Nancy P. Appelbaum, Anne S. Macpherson, and Karin Alejandra Roseblatt, eds., "Introduction: Racial Nations," in *Race and Nation in Modern Latin America* (USA: University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 5.

the presidency of Hugo Chavez. Every constitution since 1830 has acknowledged the equality of all Venezuelan citizens.⁶⁷ Ethnic equality was formally enshrined in the 1961 Constitution. The 1999 Constitution built on this by recognizing the territory and rights of indigenous peoples.⁶⁸ The Chavez government has also acted as a direct champion for minorities and against racism in Venezuela. Chavez came to the presidency as the representative of the poor, including the black and indigenous peoples. In contrast, his opposition is generally seen as the representatives of the elite. "We thus witness under the political conflict a combined class struggle and racial dispute, pitching poor blacks and mulattos against middle and upper class whites in an increasingly polarized struggle for power."⁶⁹ Chavez and his government have currently brought the idea of equality and non-discrimination to the forefront, and it will be interesting to see if, as time goes on, he holds to his opinions or if, like Simón Bolívar, he will shift his position as time goes on and pressures intensify.

Venezuela is a very culturally and ethnically interesting country. From its Spanish colonial roots to its current 'Café Con Leche' status, the makeup of Venezuela's citizens is always shifting with the inclusion of new groups. However, a general mixing of cultures and blood does not ensure a country will remain without racism, as the general consensus in Venezuela would like us to believe. Examples of racism towards Native and Afro-Venezuelan groups can be seen in both representations in the media and the opinions of the elite. However, it is important to note that, though there may be a difference of opinion in society in general, the government has long made efforts to ensure an official level of equality. The government of Hugo Chavez in particular has brought the issue to prominence, with his own mixed background becoming part of the debate. Though this is not an issue that can be solved overnight, it will be interesting to see if his government can bring much change to the overall opinions of those elites, who still harbour racist ideas.

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⁶⁷. Winthrop R. Wright, "Elitist Attitudes Toward Race in Twentieth-Century Venezuela," in *Slavery and Race Relations in Latin America*, ed. Robert Brent Toplin (Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1974), 333.

⁶⁸. Teun A. Van Dijk, *Racism and Discourse in Spain and Latin America* (Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2005), 152.

⁶⁹. Teun A. Van Dijk, *Racism and Discourse in Spain and Latin America* (Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2005), 151.

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