Gail Saunders

Race and Class in the Colonial Bahamas, 1880–1960. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2016. xiii + 371 pp. (Cloth US \$89.95)

This volume marks the culmination of Gail Saunders's distinguished career as a pioneer of research on Bahamian history and as Government Archivist, writing on everything from slavery to social history. Here, she addresses the themes of race and class. Colin A. Hughes initiated the discussion of race as a factor in Bahamian politics in the transition from colonial rule to nationhood. By contrast, Saunders examines the historical foundations of white hegemony in a discussion that begins with slave emancipation. In emphasizing race and class, she turns to a tripartite (black, brown, white) framework. She analyzes what Raymond T. Smith has called "a rigid system of hierarchical differentiation in which race and class are intimately related."¹ Her main focus is on intergroup relationships.

In this book, Saunders uses the conventional primary sources and the relevant social scientific literature, and integrates recent research findings as well as extensive interviews with contemporary informants. She writes of the final days of the system of racial apartheid with the authority of a participant observer. Chapters 1 and 2 describe the political economy of the Bahamas and the contours of its social structure. The evolution of exploitative labor systems, she notes, consigned the former slaves in the Out Islands to servitude and secured the dominance of a white agrocommercial bourgeoisie. In New Providence, the position of nonwhites was not fixed, for they increasingly formed a petty bourgeoisie. Nonwhites participated in government but most areas of social contact were segregated. In the Out Islands, the population was separated by race and culture but shared a common poverty. Communities were residentially segregated resulting in some all-white settlements.

In Chapters 3 and 4, Saunders notes the changes in Bahamian economy and society—gradual before World War I, and accelerated in the postwar years. In the Out Islands, the economy became more diversified, and migration to Florida provided an escape from poverty. This period also witnessed a rise in racial consciousness. The most extensive changes came in the postwar years when Prohibition in the United States ushered in a period of prosperity as the Bahamas became a center of bootlegging. The growth of tourism, a land boom, and foreign investment created a new class of white businessmen who consolidated their control over the economy and politics while the nonwhite

1 Race and Class in the Post-Emancipation Caribbean, in Robert Ross (ed.), *Racism and Colonialism* (1982), pp. 93–119 (p. 95).

middle class lost ground. These changes increased class divisions and hardened racial attitudes as Jim Crow segregation was introduced, without recourse to legislation. These developments, Saunders argues, came at a time of deteriorating social and economic conditions which prompted a political awareness among the nonwhites. Their inability to unite made them ineffective against the entrenched white minority. Blacks expressed their discontent in 1936 and 1938 but remained largely politically apathetic.

Chapters 5–9 trace the effective mobilization of the forces for change. World War II reinforced the system of racial segregation with the presence of Allied servicemen but the construction projects associated with the war effort also exposed the deplorable working conditions and precipitated the 1942 Burma Road riot. The riot did not lead to a mass political movement and the nonwhite middle class lacked the will to organize for change. The white elite also coopted light-skinned affluent members of that class into their own group.

The late 1940s and early 1950s saw the establishment of political organizations and newspapers aimed at promoting socioeconomic and political change. In 1953, the Progressive Liberal Party was formed to agitate for electoral reform and constitutional advancement. Initially a party led by near-white men, it was eventually dominated by black, middle-class professionals who made their appeal to the black majority on the basis of racial identity. This party, working closely with the trade union movement, eventually forced political change.

Throughout the book, Saunders demonstrates her skill in negotiating the intricacies of social relationships. By focusing on intergroup relations, she fails, however, to adequately explain the nonwhite lack of cohesion in challenging the white minority. Social relationships within that group were determined not only by color but also by what Willard B. Gatewood called (in *Aristocrats of Color*, 1990, p. 9) an “internal prestige hierarchy” based on distinctions in lifestyle, culture, education, occupation, and family background.

Saunders’s discussion is explicitly comparative for it is located in the broader regional context, especially in the period of decolonization. Surprisingly, she makes no attempt to compare developments in the Bahamas with those in Bermuda which was known for its system of informal segregation. This volume, a major achievement in Bahamian and Caribbean historiography, provides a model for those scholars who might undertake research on the intersection of race and class elsewhere in the Caribbean.

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