Bernardo Vega, *La cuestión racial y el proyecto dominicano de anexión a Estados*

Unidos en 1870. Santo Domingo: Academia Dominicana de la Historia, 2019. 347 pp.

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Today, when we look at the Caribbean, neatly parceled out in nations and (semi)colonies, we easily forget the region's volatility and lack of definition in the nineteenth century. The emergence of the independent, but internally divided United States and the gradual decline of the Spanish Empire led to fierce competition for the (supposed) riches of the region. European nations tried more or less desperately to hold on to their hegemony, but increasingly they had to cede to U.S. military power and the Monroe doctrine that legitimized it. The United States conquered the northern part of Mexico and bought Alaska from the Russians, failing in their attempts to buy Cuba, but using a score of profit-seeking filibusters, diplomats, and politicians to pursue the country's geopolitical ambitions in the region. If necessary, it made use of "*el apoyo moral de sus cañones*," as a U.S. ambassador phrased it (cited on p. 116). Thus, the nineteenth century was a period of new geopolitical configurations and what we may call a "scramble" for the Caribbean.

The small, independent nation of Santo Domingo seemed to be up for grabs. It had vulnerable and dependent presidents who often looked to the United States for political help, either against political adversaries or against neighboring Haiti. The country promised infinite resources, cheap land, and unique geopolitical advantages. Or at least, that is what well-connected capitalist adventurers wanted the U.S. government to believe. The complex and intricate dealings that were the result of their activities are the theme of this new book by the prolific Dominican historian Bernardo Vega. It is a detailed account of the convoluted and obscure negotiations that took place both in the Dominican Republic and the United States. A score of Dominican and U.S. politicians tried to bring about the leasing of the strategic Samaná Bay or the annexation of the country by the United States. In these negotiations self-interest and corruption were never very far away. They finally convinced U.S. President Ulysses Grant to send a proposal for annexation to the Senate in 1870. Largely as the result of the opposition of a powerful member of his own party, Charles Sumner, the proposal ended in failure.

Race was a crucial subtext in these geopolitical dealings. The Dominican Republic was generally seen as a mulatto republic, in stark contrast to Haiti. But this meant different things in the two countries. In the United States it meant that Dominican society presented a more beneficial and acceptable form of Blackness. This led to the paradox that most U.S. politicians considered the Dominican elite, in spite of its own self-image, to represent a "Black" republic.

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The entire U.S. debate around the country's annexation centered on the meaning of this element of Dominican society. Advocates of Annexation saw the country as an excellent place to send slaves who were liberated in the United States. Even the famous abolitionist (and ex-slave) Frederick Douglass actively participated in the plans for Annexation, because he believed the Dominican Republic could be a refuge for Black Americans who wanted to escape their oppression in the United States. Opponents of the Annexation presented the Dominican Republic as a basically "Black" country that would never fit into the United States. Charles Sumner noted that the Dominican Republic "*ocupada por una raza distinta, de otro color, jamás podrá convertirse en posesión de los Estados Unidos*" (Vega's translation, p. 173).

Vega's book thus focuses on an extremely important and exciting period of Caribbean history, presenting a detailed account of the negotiations around the Annexation project based on a wealth of published (and some primary) sources. In essence, it is a recompilation of everything that has been written about this period, often highlighting discrepancies in the historical narratives of the period. The book does not read very smoothly and seems to have been edited less meticulously than customary in Vega's publications, but as an invitation to further research it will be very useful.

Michiel Baud

CEDLA, University of Amsterdam, Amsterdam, the Netherlands

J.M.Baud@CEDLA.nl