

# Slavery, the Labour Movement and Spanish Colonialism in Cuba, 1850–1890<sup>1</sup>

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**Summary:** Nineteenth-century Cuban colonial and slave society sharply divided its inhabitants by race and ethnicity. These race and ethnicity divisions, and the formidable repressive apparatus necessary to sustain slavery and colonialism, hindered the emergence of a class identity among the urban popular classes. However, this oppressive atmosphere created working and living conditions that compelled workers of diverse ethnicity and race to participate, increasingly, in collective action together. Free labour shared many of the adversities imposed on unfree labour, which led the emerging Cuban labour movement, first to oppose the use of unfree labour in the factories, and later, to become openly abolitionist.

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The existing historiography on nineteenth-century Cuban labour has mainly focused on rural slavery, while urban workers have been largely neglected.<sup>2</sup> Little is known about the transition to free labour in Cuban urban centres. In addition, studies of organized labour in Cuba offer few insights into the connection between free and unfree labour in these centres.<sup>3</sup> However, the history of labour cannot provide a complete

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<sup>2</sup> For works focusing on sugar slavery in Cuba, see Raúl Cepero Bonilla, “Azúcar y abolición (apuntes para una historia crítica del abolicionismo)” (1st pub. 1948), in Raúl Cepero Bonilla, *Escritos históricos*, ed. María Luisa Cepero Fernández (Havana, 1989), pp. 11–171; José Rivero Muñiz, “Esquema del movimiento obrero”, in Ramiro Guerra y Sánchez *et al.* (eds), *Historia de la nación cubana*, 10 vols (Havana, 1952), VII, pp. 247–300; Franklin W. Knight, *Slave Society in Cuba during the Nineteenth Century* (Wisconsin, 1970); Rebecca J. Scott, *Slave Emancipation in Cuba: The Transition to Free Labor, 1860–1899* (Princeton, 1985); Manuel Moreno Fragnals, *El Ingenio: complejo económico social cubano del azúcar*, 3 vols (Havana, 1978; 1st ed. 1964); and Laird W. Bergad, *Cuban Rural Society in the Nineteenth Century: the Social and Economic History of Monoculture in Matanzas* (Princeton, 1990).

<sup>3</sup> See, for instance, Hobart A. Spalding Jr, “The Workers’ Struggle: 1850–1961”, *Cuba Review*, 4 (1) (1974), pp. 3–10; Sergio Aguirre, *Eco de caminos* (Havana, 1974); Ariel Hidalgo, *Orígenes del movimiento obrero y del pensamiento socialista en Cuba* (Havana, 1976); *Las Clases y la lucha de clases en la sociedad neocolonial cubana*, 5 vols (Havana,

explanation for social change in Cuba without considering all “urban popular classes”, both free and unfree, as interconnected and in constant evolution.

Until the 1980s, most historical analyses contended that the increasing need for skilled labour could not be satisfied with slave labour; thus, the development of production techniques provoked the elimination of slavery in Cuba.<sup>4</sup> Recent studies argue that the need for skilled labour was not the reason for abolishing slave labour on this Caribbean island. They contend that planters tried to use slave labour as long as they could, despite changes in production techniques. It was the slaves’ struggle for freedom that made slavery unviable.<sup>5</sup> The examination of working conditions in tobacco growing and urban trades reinforces this view. Tobacco growing and manufacturing, the most important areas of production after sugar, required a highly skilled labour force, and yet slaves were used massively in this production. The fact that slaves could be used as skilled labourers meant that free and unfree labour coexisted in all productive sectors.<sup>6</sup>

Following this latter line of analysis, I contend that the working conditions that slavery and the Spanish colonial administration created in Cuba’s urban centres drove the urban popular sector to build class ties across divisions of race and ethnicity. Slavery and colonial laws were not only used to extract the slaves’ labour, they also helped the elite in Cuba to harden labour relations for free or partially free labour in urban centres. Slavery was the labour model of the elite in Cuba, who considered it essential to enforce rigid racial segregation to sustain it.<sup>7</sup> When slaves could not be used, the socio-economic elite sought to have the closest equivalent, i.e. indentured servants, apprentices, soldiers, prisoners, etc. Moreover, as the historian Julio Le Riverend claims, the presence of this unfree or semi-free labour was used to put pressure on free labourers into accepting harder working conditions.<sup>8</sup> Until the 1880s, free labourers in Cuba faced the constant threat of being replaced by

1980–1981); Aleida Plasencia Moro, “Historia del movimiento obrero en Cuba”, in Pablo González Casanova (ed.), *Historia del movimiento obrero en América Latina*, 4 vols (Mexico City, 1984), I, pp. 88–183; and Instituto de Historia [. . .] de Cuba, *Historia del movimiento obrero cubano 1865–1958*, 2 vols (Havana, 1987).

<sup>4</sup> This development is best exemplified in Cepero, “Azúcar y abolición”; Moreno Friginals, *El Ingenio*; and Knight, *Slave Society*, pp. 178–182.

<sup>5</sup> Scott’s *Slave Emancipation* and Bergad’s *Cuban Rural Society* best represent this point.

<sup>6</sup> Joan Casanovas Codina, “Labor and Colonialism in Cuba in the Second Half of the Nineteenth Century” (Ph.D., State University of New York at Stony Brook, 1994), pp. 32–53.

<sup>7</sup> For the relationship between slavery and racial segregation, see Verena Martínez-Alier (or Stolcke), *Marriage, Class and Colour in Nineteenth Century Cuba: A Study of Racial Attitudes and Sexual Values in a Slave Society* (London, 1974).

<sup>8</sup> Julio Le Riverend Brusone, *La Habana (Biografía de una provincia)* (Havana, 1960), p. 310.

forced labourers. Therefore, free labour co-operated increasingly with unfree labour in eliminating the combination of slavery and colonialism.

### THE IMPACT OF BOND LABOUR ON FREE LABOUR IN THE MID-NINETEENTH CENTURY

Nineteenth-century Cuban colonial and slave society sharply divided its inhabitants by race and ethnicity. Despite differences between the Spanish and the Creole elites because of the preferential treatment that the Spanish administration gave to wealthy Spaniards, both elites considered that in Cuba non-whites had to be enslaved or have their freedom severely curtailed. Until the end of slavery in 1886, most of the Creole elite, especially in western Cuba, consented to Spanish military rule as the guarantor of this order, which gave *Peninsulares* (Spanish residents on the island) a preponderant position. Among poor whites, *Peninsulares* also had some privileges. They filled the ranks of the better-paid jobs in many workshops and tobacco factories, and the administration gave them preferential treatment.

The Spanish and Creole elite, though, never succeeded in creating a society totally segregated according to race and ethnicity. The coexistence of free and unfree labour was particularly intense in urban centres. In agricultural production, it was easier than in urban trades to have free and unfree labour working separately, even when these two kinds of labour were doing the same task. Strong labour demand and the small spaces used for manufacturing meant that in Cuba's urban centres free and unfree labourers were in constant contact, often doing the same tasks in the same workshops or factories, and under the same masters or overseers. Proximity helped urban labourers of different social ranks to build a shared identity and acknowledge their common interests, the basis for developing collective action.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, the very intense militarization of Cuba created an atmosphere of harsh political repression for the popular sector as a whole.

With the colossal expansion of the urban economy from the 1830s on, the socio-economic elite in Cuba looked for more coercive forms of labour. Responding to the interests of this elite, the colonial administration created legal mechanisms to coerce juridically free labour. One example of the relationship between this pro-slavery socio-economic elite and the Spanish colonial administration is the apprentice system established in Cuba between the late 1830s and the mid-1860s. This

<sup>9</sup> Philip A. Howard in "Culture, Nationalism, and Liberation: The Afro-Cuban Mutual Aid Societies in the Nineteenth Century" (Ph.D., Indiana University, 1988), p. 226, contends that in the 1880s "white and black urban labourers in some cities shared similar socioeconomic experiences", which led them to develop joint collective action. However, Howard does not provide information about the working conditions that increasingly drove these "white and black" workers together.

system contributed to the hardening of work conditions for apprentices, many of whom were juridically free labourers, as well as for urban labour in general. It was devised and implemented precisely when labour demand increased in Cuba's urban centres because of the tremendous economic growth of those years.<sup>10</sup> In the words of the Creole intellectual Antonio Bachiller y Morales, who conceived the new system in 1835, it was a system not for reviving the European "ancient and discredited guild organization" but for mitigating "vagrancy" and "stirring up a judicious emulation among artisans".<sup>11</sup>

The disappearance of the trade *cofradías* at the beginning of the nineteenth century did not eliminate the tradition of placing apprentices under the orders of an artisan master by oral contract. The old contracts, in the times of the *cofradías*, established that the apprentice would work without wages in a workshop for two to five years in exchange for learning the trade. Both slaves and free labourers could be apprentices. However, in 1837, following the suggestions of Bachiller from the *Sociedad Económica*, the government ruled that all apprentices had to be indentured, and that the *Sociedad Económica* was in charge of supervising apprentices and their masters in all major Cuban centres through a *Junta de Aprendizaje* (Board of Apprenticeship). Moreover, the *Junta de Aprendizaje* was in charge of directly indenturing children who were orphaned, abandoned, or whose parents or owners agreed to this system in exchange for the training and maintenance of their indentured dependants. The *Sociedad Económica* could place these indentured apprentices in the workshops that it created expressly for them or in any other workshop, even without the master's consent. As in previous times, apprentices did not get wages for several years, but now they had to remain as apprentices even after learning the trade well enough to take the journeymen exams that the *Sociedad Económica* supervised.<sup>12</sup>

The new set of regulations the government established in 1849 reveals how much slavery affected this apprenticeship system. Females could be indentured for up to ten years and males up to twelve. To break restrictions on the number of individuals in a trade, each master had to accept up to two indentured apprentices from the *Sociedad Económica*

<sup>10</sup> Julio Le Riverend Brusone, *Economic History of Cuba* (Havana, 1967), pp. 158–159.

<sup>11</sup> Leví Marrero y Artilés, *Cuba: economía y sociedad*, 15 vols (San Juan and Madrid, 1972–1992), XIII, pp. 147–150.

<sup>12</sup> For the workshops of the *Sociedad Económica*, see Jacobo de la Pezuela y Lobo, *Diccionario geográfico, estadístico, histórico de la isla de Cuba*, 4 vols (Madrid, 1866), III, p. 267; and Antonio María de Gordon, *El tabaco en Cuba y de Acosta* (Havana, 1901), pp. 36–37. These workshops seem to copy the English new "Workhouses" or "Bastilles" established after the Poor Law of 1834, just two years before Bachiller's proposal, and which E.P. Thompson has studied in *The Making of the English Working Class* (New York, 1966), pp. 266–268. For apprentices remaining as such long after learning the trade, see José Rivero Muñoz, *Tabaco: su historia en Cuba*, 2 vols (Havana, 1964), II, pp. 263, 272–273.

per journeymen he employed. An official delegate monitored apprentices and commented on their performance in a booklet that every apprentice had to have. If the apprentice had been sick or disobedient, his term was extended. Another punishment was to send apprentices to a penal institution. If this could not break the apprentices' will, they were sent to work in the fields. This was the same punishment meted out to rebellious urban slaves. Female apprentices were subject to these regulations as well, but with an additional clause: if they got pregnant, they had to compensate their master for their services.<sup>13</sup> The instructions also forbade masters from employing corporal punishments against apprentices, but the use of the whip and stocks and fetters continued to be common practice.

In the mid-1850s, apprentice conditions continued to worsen with the founding in Havana of a large workhouse known as the *Taller General Correccional de Aprendices* (General Correctional Workshop for Apprentices). This was a factory-prison in which orphans and indentured apprentices worked alongside the children that the police arrested as “vagrants” or the apprentices sent there as punishment. In the *Taller* there were sharp differences along racial lines. Only white apprentices were allowed to go to evening classes in geometry and instrument drawing in one of the *Sociedad Económica*'s schools, which reflects the official interest in blocking Afro-Cubans' access to education.<sup>14</sup>

It is difficult to evaluate the impact of the apprentice system introduced in the 1830s. The socio-economic and administrative elite wanted as many indentured apprentices as possible because they were a cheap form of unfree labour, and because more apprentices meant more journeymen, both free and slave, and lower wages in the future. In placing orphaned, abandoned and poor children into workshops and factories as indentured apprentices, it probably increased by one fourth or more the number of apprentices in Havana, who already numbered more than 4,000 in the late 1830s.<sup>15</sup> The regulations for the apprentices that the administration directly indentured effectively helped to harden labour conditions for the apprentices privately indentured by their parents or

<sup>13</sup> Cuba, *Reglamento para el aprendizaje de artes y oficios* (Havana, 1849).

<sup>14</sup> Cuba, *Proyecto de Reglamento de la Junta y Ramo de Aprendizaje de la Habana y su Jurisdicción Administrativa* (Havana, 1863). Antonio L[ópez] de Letona, *Isla de Cuba: Reflexiones sobre su estado social, político y económico; su administración y gobierno* (Madrid, 1865), pp. 57–58.

<sup>15</sup> For an assessment of the number of apprentices that the *Sociedad Económica* indentured in the 1840s and 1850s, see Marrero, *Cuba*, XI, p. 81; *ibid.*, XIII, pp. 147–150; “Resumen estadístico de la población, riqueza agrícola, comercio, industria, y fomento de la isla de Cuba”, p. 30 (in Cuba, *Comisión de Estadística, Cuadro estadístico de la siempre fiel Isla de Cuba, correspondiente al año de 1846* (Havana, 1847)); and John George F. Wurdemann, *Notes on Cuba* (Boston, 1844), pp. 235–239 (transcribed in Louis A. Pérez Jr (ed.), *Slaves, Sugar, & Colonial Society: Travel Accounts of Cuba, 1801–1899* (Wilmington, Delaware, 1992), pp. 141–142).

owners. Indentured apprenticeship lasted until shortly after the end of the Ten Years' War in 1878,<sup>16</sup> and severe physical abuse persisted at least until the turn of the century.<sup>17</sup>

Another official coercive device closely connected to the apprenticeship system was the *Libreta del tabaquero* (journeyman cigar maker's booklet) used in Havana from the early 1850s to the mid-1860s. The administration instituted the *Libreta del tabaquero* in 1851 in response to tobacco manufacturers' complaints that high labour demand allowed journeymen cigar makers to "abuse" employers. Under the rules of the *Libreta* system every journeyman cigar maker, both male and female, had to register with the *Sociedad Económica's* "Industry Section" – in fact, the same section that was in charge of monitoring apprentices. The cigar maker's workplace, place of birth, home address, physical traits, and possession or otherwise of a journeyman's title were recorded in the *Libreta*. No cigar manufacturer could accept a free worker or a slave hiring himself out without the *Libreta*. Whenever the journeyman found employment, the employer kept the *Libreta*. In it, the employer could annotate the amount of money he advanced to the employee. This latter clause existed because employers in Cuba followed the frequent practice of advancing money to employees to attract them to a particular workshop.<sup>18</sup> If the employer noted that the employee owed him money, the worker could not leave the factory.

In 1859, Captain General José Gutiérrez de la Concha tried to extend the *Libreta* system to all trades and even to rural workers throughout the island. Concha, who governed Cuba between 1854 and 1859, argued that the high demand for labour in Cuba gave free labourers too much leverage over employers. As he cynically put it,

[In Europe] the difficulty is that money capital, relatively more scarce than labour capital, constantly tends to abuse the latter by exploiting the need of

<sup>16</sup> For the decline of the indentured apprenticeship system after the Ten Years' War, see José Rivero Muñiz, "La lectura en las tabaquerías; monografía histórica", *Revista de la Biblioteca Nacional* [of Cuba], 2nd series, 2:4 (1951), n. 29 on p. 228.

<sup>17</sup> On physical punishments to discipline apprentices, see Rivero Muñiz, "La lectura", pp. 252–253; Instituto de Historia, *Historia del movimiento obrero*, I, p. 19; "Partes de novedad de la Jefatura Superior de Policía, 1883–1884", Archivo Histórico Nacional, Madrid (hereafter AHN), Ultramar, leg. 5917, exp. 2; and the periodical *El Productor* (Havana and Guanabacoa, 1887–1892).

<sup>18</sup> "Libreta para oficiales artesanos dispuesta por el Superior Gobierno en resolución de 25 de julio de 1851" (transcribed in José Antonio Portuondo, "*La Aurora*" y los comienzos de la presna obrera en Cuba (Havana, 1961), pp. 102–105). Cuba, *Proyecto de Reglamento de la Junta y Ramo de Aprendizaje*, p. 7; and *D. del G. de 22 de Diciembre de 1856, previniendo que las libretas de oficiales de tabaquería se expidan por la junta de aprendizaje de artes y oficios* (transcribed in Félix Erénchun, *Anales de la Isla de Cuba. Diccionario administrativo, económico, estadístico y legislativo* [. . .] Año de 1856 (Havana, 1857), p. 736). Although Rivero Muñiz in *Tabaco*, II, p. 276 states that the *Libreta del tabaquero* system did not last long, it lasted more than a decade.

the worker to subsist: here [in Cuba], on the contrary, the limited number of free workers easily impose their free will on the owners of workshops, and have in their hands the fate of these shops by leaving one workshop owner to employ themselves in another one because they know that their replacement is difficult or impossible.<sup>19</sup>

None the less, Concha's project failed and the *Libreta* system could never be extended beyond the tobacco industry. Soon, the *Libreta del tabaquero* fell into disuse, but this did not stop the administration from continuing to debate the possibility of creating "workhouses" and of reimplementing the *Libreta* to limit vagrancy and to help employers discipline the workforce.<sup>20</sup> Even after the end of slavery in 1886, the colonial administration unsuccessfully tried to implement the same *Libreta* system for domestic servants, many of whom had been slaves.<sup>21</sup> Just as the apprenticeship system created in the mid-1830s fell into decline, the *Libreta* faded in the mid-1860s, which seems to have been a direct consequence of popular mobilization in those years.

Legal mechanisms to coerce juridically free labour into semi-free labour were also used against *Peninsulares*. This was the case with shop and factory assistants (*dependientes*), whose life was similar to that of the apprentices. The great majority of *dependientes* were poor Peninsular immigrants who lived and worked in extremely oppressive conditions. Most of them were employed in small stores and workshops, but some were employed in tobacco factories. *Dependientes* usually lived in the workplace, often with some apprentices, slaves or indentured Chinese labourers, with whom they did similar tasks and shared many of their working conditions. Their regular working day was sixteen hours long, without a break even on Sundays, and their freedom of movement was severely limited. However, unlike slaves and indentured Chinese labourers, most *dependientes* could leave the workplace once every two weeks. Still, to work or to find employment in another store, *dependientes*

<sup>19</sup> "Circular" no. 1829, signed by Captain General José [Gutiérrez] de la Concha on 16 March 1859 (transcribed in Portuondo, "La Aurora", pp. 105–107).

<sup>20</sup> For the debate on the use of the *Libreta* to discipline the workforce, see José María Velasco, *Guerra de Cuba. Causas de su duración y medios de terminarla y asegurar su pacificación* (Madrid, 1872). Concha, in trying to extend the *Libreta* to rural labour, was probably following the system already implemented in Puerto Rico in 1849, and which fell into disuse in much of the island by the late 1860s. It was finally suppressed with the end of slavery in 1873. For the *Libreta* system in Puerto Rico, see Andrés A. Ramos Mattei, "Technical Innovations and Social Change in the Sugar Industry of Puerto Rico, 1870–1880", in Manuel Morena Friginals *et al.*, (eds), *Between Slavery and Free Labor* (Baltimore, 1985), pp. 161–163; and *Información sobre reformas en Cuba y Puerto Rico celebrada en Madrid en 1866 y 67 por los representates de ambas Islas*, 2 vols (2nd ed. New York, 1877), I, p. 126.

<sup>21</sup> [Roig] "La patria y los obreros", *El Productor* (Havana) (hereafter *E.P.H.*), II:63 (12 May 1889), p. 1; J., "La libreta y 'La Lucha'", *E.P.H.*, 2nd series, I:2 (12 September 1889), pp. 1–2.

needed official authorization,<sup>22</sup> and they suffered severe corporal punishments as well. Even after the end of slavery in 1886 and up to the beginning of the twentieth century, this group of workers remained semi-free and continued to endure very harsh working conditions.<sup>23</sup>

### THE EARLY CUBAN LABOUR MOVEMENT

Fostered by favourable political conditions, the Cuban labour movement that emerged in the late 1850s became stronger during the following decade. In the 1860s, the Spanish government and the socio-economic elite in Cuba felt compelled to embark on a process of colonial reforms. The growth of Peninsular immigration and international pressure against the slave trade, mainly from the United Kingdom and the United States, until its extinction in 1867, increased the proportion of whites in Cuba. In 1862, for the first time in nineteenth-century Cuba, a population census revealed that there were clearly more whites than Afro-Cubans. Thus, the traditional colonial policy based on the threat to the Creole elite that “Cuba would be either Spanish or African” lost credibility.

Traditionally, in Cuba the administration had systematically favoured the Spanish party. This party was an informal network of Peninsular merchants, tobacco-factory owners, and some planters who monopolized local politics on the island. In the 1860s, however, the administration allowed the Creole elite to debate colonial reforms through the founding or enlargement of many associations and periodicals. The Creole elite welcomed this policy shift and used it to promote colonial reform by setting up a political movement known as the Reformist party, although it was never established as a formal political party because Spanish colonial law forbade it. This movement supported free trade to foster Cuban exports, white immigration, and the immediate end of the slave trade, but not of slavery itself. Because all these reforms were specific to Cuba, the Reformist movement claimed that Cuba ought to have an autonomous government. As was to be expected, to preserve its privileged position *vis-à-vis* the colonial administration, the Spanish party initiated an aggressive anti-reformist campaign.

<sup>22</sup> On the working conditions of the tobacco factory *dependientes* and apprentices, see Rivero Muñiz, *Tabaco*, II, p. 272. For the authorization *dependientes* needed in order to change their place of work, see “1854.–Noviembre 30.–Decreto del Gobernador Capitan general declarando las resoluciones que correspondan á la Secretaría del Gobierno político de la Habana”, in Joaquín Rodríguez San Pedro (ed.), *Legislación ultramarina*, 12 vols (Madrid, 1865–1868), X, p. 71.

<sup>23</sup> For the “semi-free” status of *dependientes* in tobacco factories after the abolition of slavery, see Rivero Muñiz, *Tabaco*, II, p. 307; José Rivero Muñiz, “Bosquejo Histórico de la Sociedad de Escogedores de Tabacos de la Habana”, *Revista Tabaco*, I:3 (1933), p. 11; Santiago Iglesias Pantín, *Luchas Emancipadoras (crónicas de Puerto Rico)* (San Juan, 1929), pp. 17–18; and Gaspar Jorge García Galló, *Biografía del Tabaco Habano* ([Santa Clara], 1959), pp. 71, 75, 83.



To compensate for the near total absence of merchants and tobacco-factory owners in its ranks, and to weaken their opposition, the Reformist movement sought the backing of white artisans by reducing its support of slavery. Free white workers were opposed to the use of unfree labour in the factories and workshops because it helped employers to harshen working conditions. The Reformist movement therefore began to present itself as being closer to abolitionism by expressing support for the Union in the American Civil War.<sup>24</sup> Moreover, reformists began to propagate the idea that artisans ought to have better access to education and culture, that they should form co-operatives and trade unions, and that they had the right to resort to collective bargaining and to elect their delegates for this purpose.<sup>25</sup> Relaxation of press censorship from the early 1860s until 1866 even allowed reformists to debate socialist ideas for the first time in Cuba.<sup>26</sup>

Among the popular classes, the rise of reformism created a political atmosphere favourable to labour mobilization, and many white artisans joined the Reformist movement. Already in 1848, a few Spanish artisans had founded a recreational centre in one of Havana's neighbourhoods, and in the late 1850s the administration authorized some mutual-aid associations, which were racially segregated, in western Cuba as well as in Camagüey, in the eastern half of the island. Nevertheless, in 1865 a wave of strikes broke out for the first time among the tobacco workers of Havana. Not surprisingly, they voiced their demands through the reformist press. A few months after these strikes, printers founded an association for all the white members of the trade in Havana, while tobacco workers sought to follow this path. The administration stopped this latter attempt, however, and only allowed associations for tobacco workers of the same neighbourhood. Furthermore, Havana's artisans founded the first labour periodical, *La Aurora*, a weekly closely linked to the reformist *El Siglo*, a daily.

Difficulties in extending labour organization due to official repression led the editors of *La Aurora* to concentrate on the education of artisans. Thus, one of *La Aurora's* first campaigns was to promote the reading of books and periodicals during working hours in the tobacco factories. This latter venture known as the *lectura* – consisted in having a person read aloud while his fellow cigar makers rolled cigars. Soon, it became the most important cultural institution among tobacco workers in Cuba for nearly a century. Despite tobacco manufacturers' opposition, by mid-1866 the *lectura* was a daily event in most of the larger factories

<sup>24</sup> *El Siglo*, 2:378 (4 December 1863); *ibid.*, 2:379 (7 December 1863); *ibid.*, 3:163 (23 August 1864).

<sup>25</sup> Cepero, "El Siglo (1862–1868) un periódico en lucha contra la censura" (first pub. 1957), in Cepero, *Escritos históricos*, pp. 189–193.

<sup>26</sup> For *El Siglo's* exposition of socialist ideas, see Cepero, "El Siglo", pp. 191–192. See too José Moreno de Fuentes, *Estudios económico-sociales* (Havana, 1865).

and workshops in Havana and surrounding towns. Regarding the rapid spread of the *lectura*, *La Aurora* acknowledged the help of the reformists: "The daises in the workshops followed those in the *Liceo*" (the bourgeois clubs).<sup>27</sup> Besides the *lectura*, Havana's artisans began to found schools to educate their children and themselves.

Both the strikes and the *lectura* helped to blur divisions of race and status among workers. Since free and unfree labour worked together in tobacco manufacturing, non-whites and probably even self-hired slaves participated in the strikes. Furthermore, slaves, indentured Chinese labourers and free blacks became part of the audience during the readings in the factories. Despite censorship from the administration and the manufacturers, through the *lectura* unfree workers could hear the open or covert denunciations of physical abuse in the factories. They also might have heard abolitionist proclamations from the Spanish Abolitionist Society founded in 1865 in Madrid, or from the Cuban separatists in exile. The labour movement of the 1860s, nevertheless, never gave explicit support to abolition.

The rapid spread of the readings and associations in the tobacco factories and the growth of reformism infuriated most manufacturers. One of their moves was to claim that there was a shortage in leaf tobacco in order to fire thousands of workers until they accepted lower pay or worse working conditions. The tension between the Reformist and the Spanish parties reached a peak in May 1866, when reformists won all the seats in a commission to negotiate colonial policy changes in Madrid. After a theatre event, these two parties clashed in downtown Havana, an event known as the *Tacos del Louvre*. The fact that in this clash many tobacco workers of all races and ethnicities sided with the reformists reflects the popularity of reformism, while the Spanish party showed that it could mobilize cart and coach drivers, most of them *Peninsulares*.

Events like the *Tacos del Louvre* were one of the main causes that prompted a policy shift from the Spanish administration. The *lectura* was forbidden and soon few reformist clubs and periodicals remained operational. On the other hand, the *Tacos del Louvre* exposed strong divisions within the popular classes. During this period it seems that clashes between artisans supporting Spanish rule and artisans supporting Cuban autonomy or independence became more frequent. Spanish artisans occupied privileged positions in the tobacco factories. Most of the overseers were Spaniards and the better paid trades were in their hands. Thus, with the growth of labour mobilization, Creoles and non-whites sought to improve their respective positions.

Spain's reactionary policies after the *Tacos del Louvre* and the failure of reformism helped separatists to rally the necessary popular support

<sup>27</sup> "Utilidad de las tribunas en los talleres", *La Aurora*, 1:27 (22 April 1866).

to unleash the Ten Years' War in October 1868. Since the dominant form of separatism until the 1860s had been pro-slavery annexationism to the United States, until then cigar makers participated little in the separatist conspiracies. However, repression of the labour movement, and the shift toward populism and abolitionism of a sector of the separatist leadership, led many white and non-white artisans to become separatist.<sup>28</sup>

### THE FORMATION OF A TWO-PRONGED LABOUR MOVEMENT

The outbreak of the Ten Years' War gave the Spanish party the opportunity to regain much of its lost power. Spain's military and political weakness, due to the beginning of a six-year revolutionary period in the Peninsula, compelled the colonial administration to rely on the Spanish party to sustain colonial rule. Parallel to the growth of the separatist campaign, the Spanish party broadened its base by arming most *Peninsulares* and compelling or forcing them to join the *Voluntarios*, an irregular militia founded some years before the war that grew from 10,000 in 1868 to 70,000 in the early 1870s.

The violence the *Voluntarios* unleashed forced scores of Creole workers to go into exile, most of them to southern Florida and New York. This mass exodus led to the formation of two branches of the Cuban labour movement. Despite repression and the increasing militarization of Cuba's urban centres, participation in the *Voluntarios* allowed some Peninsular artisans to participate in mutual-aid and recreational associations. On the other hand, *émigré* workers in the United States used their experience from the associations established in Cuba from the 1850s on to develop their own labour movement. Although these two branches of the Cuban labour movement had a common past in the labour struggles of the mid-1860s, the war determined their independent evolution for ten years. As in past periods in which the colonial administration was strongly repressive, throughout the war *Peninsulares* became the dominant group within the popular associations. Therefore, it was only in the exile communities in the United States that Creoles could occupy leadership positions in popular associations. Overall, these associations served as the bedrock from which the labour movement could expand after the war.

The evolution of these two branches of the Cuban labour movement shows that the urban popular sector, both in western Cuba and in the exile communities, sought to overcome the strong limitations that the war imposed on organized labour. Inside Cuba, despite the heavy

<sup>28</sup> For the acceptance of separatism among the popular sector in Havana, see César García del Pino, "La Habana en los días de Yara", *Revista de la Biblioteca Nacional José Martí*, 20 (1978), pp. 149–172.

militarization of this colonial society, workers sought to curtail the power of the Spanish party. Although wealthy *Peninsulares* filled the officer ranks of the *Voluntarios*, the massive participation of lower-class *Peninsulares* in this irregular militia meant that at least part of the labour force retained some bargaining power when dealing with the administration. This helped lower-class *Peninsulares* to establish guilds, mutual-aid societies and cultural centres, as well as to participate in the founding of regional associations. For instance, in one application a group of Peninsular artisans claimed that as *Peninsulares* and *Voluntarios* they deserved to be authorized to found a society:

The ones signing below, natives of Asturias and Santander, all of them members of the *Voluntarios*' Institute, eager to establish a recreation centre where artisans will be able to expand and relax their minds with useful and honest entertainments, which will avoid their attending of other places with atmospheres not so conducive to purifying their spirit, [. . .] [have] the purpose of founding a society named "Artisans' Institute" of mainly artistic and literary character.<sup>29</sup>

Favourable political circumstances during the Spanish Republic of 1873 helped the Peninsular-led labour movement to challenge radically the leadership of the Spanish party. A principal aspect of this confrontation was the abolitionism of federal-republicans, who proposed the franchise and abolition granted to Puerto Rico in 1873 as a reform model for Cuba. This abolitionism, nevertheless, did not mean the absence of racism. Clearly continuing the traditions of the Reformist movement, which was always very worried about the possible "Africanization" of Cuba, a labour weekly declared: "We want the growth of the [Cuban] population, and yet we want it to be of the white or European race."<sup>30</sup>

The fall of the Spanish Republic was a serious set-back for the republicans in Cuba, but despite repression the federal-republican labour movement persisted. Thus, when the transformation of colonial society due to the Ten Years' War forced Spain to start reforming the colonial system before the end of the war, federal-republicans re-emerged and, in 1876, they established the *Recreo de Obreros*, which evolved into the most important centre of the labour movement in Cuba. Due to these metropolitan policy changes at the end of the war and the reduction in the number of slaves, even non-whites succeeded in establishing associations after nearly two decades of prohibition. Therefore, when Cuban separatists and the Spanish army signed the Treaty of El Zanjón in 1878, there was already a network of popular associations that served as the basis from which the labour movement expanded rapidly.

<sup>29</sup> "Exp. prom. por el Gobernador Político dando cuenta del expediente instruido á consecuencia de la solicitud de D. Saturnino Martínez, para establecer una Sociedad que se titule 'Instituto de Artesanos'", AHN, Ultramar, leg. 5899.

<sup>30</sup> "Inmigración Asiática", *La Unión*, 20 (12 October 1873), p. 2.

On the other hand, working-class exiles did not participate in the separatist movement unconditionally. Due to the hostile position towards labour demands of the conservative wing of the separatist leadership, the *Aldamistas*, exiled workers joined the *Quesadistas*, the left wing of the movement, and made contact with the International Working Men's Association (First International). As the Spanish consul reported from New York in 1872, "a great number of Cuban separatists, especially the Quesadista Party, belong to the society [known as] 'The International,' and they declare that 'the cause of the commune' is the cause of 'Independent Cuba.' [. . .]".<sup>31</sup>

As in Cuba, the Treaty of El Zanjón triggered a deep transformation of the Cuban working-class exile communities. After the war, freedom to enter and leave Cuba gave exiled tobacco workers a better bargaining position in labour disputes at the tobacco factories, which in most cases were owned or managed by people with strong links to the separatist leadership. In 1878, many of these workers returned to Cuba, while the separatist movement dwindled, and from then on they joined their counterparts on the island in the building of a new labour movement, one that incorporated the experiences of the two labour struggles Cuban workers had engaged in throughout the war.

### A NEW CUBAN LABOUR MOVEMENT

The Treaty of El Zanjón, signed in February 1878, marked the beginning of a period in which Spain attempted a substantial transformation of the colonial system by granting a degree of freedom never experienced before in Cuba. The Spanish party and the old Creole reformists formed political parties, the Party of Constitutional Union (UC) and the Liberal Party of Cuba (PLC) respectively. Press censorship, furthermore, was slackened. These colonial policy changes had a profound impact on the labour movement. The decline of slavery until its total abolition in October 1886, and Spain's transformation of the repressive apparatus used to sustain slavery, aided the emergence of many working-class societies. Most of these associations were the mere surfacing or transformation of already existing associations, many of them clandestine or semi-clandestine. During the war they had been able to operate by declaring that their main purpose was to offer education, cultural activities and mutual-aid services for their membership. With the political reforms that followed El Zanjón, however, many of these associations took on a more radical character and legal labour unions emerged for

<sup>31</sup> "Carta del Ministro Plenipotenciario de España en Washington al Ministro de Estado. Manifestación de comunistas franceses y emigrados cubanos, La Internacional, la Alianza", 27 January 1872, Real Academia de la Historia. Colección Caballero de Rodas, doc. 858, vol. IV, ff. 270–271. On the support that separatists in New York expressed for the Communards, see Instituto de Historia, *Historia del movimiento obrero*, I, pp. 37–39.

the first time in Cuba. Again, Creole whites began to occupy some leadership positions alongside *Peninsulares*. Parallel to the emergence of these associations, and often in connection with them, Afro-Cubans founded a myriad of associations, which suggests that they had a quite limited role in the main trade unions.

Initially the two political parties of the socio-economic elite, the PLC and the UC, followed political lines to which this growing popular associational movement felt little attraction. A crucial issue was the very moderate or insincere abolitionism of both parties, and the limited interest that they showed for the situation of urban labour. The impact of the short-lived but openly abolitionist and separatist uprising known as the *Guerra Chiquita* (1879–1880), and the deepening of colonial reforms after it, allowed the reformist-led labour movement to participate in the republican Democratic Party experiment of 1881. Although this party could not win representatives at the polls due to the highly restrictive electoral system in Cuba, not lack of popularity, it propelled the PLC toward radical abolitionism. The increasingly marginal position of the PLC, despite its elitism, prompted this party to make overtures to the republicans. Until the end of slavery in 1886, republicans kept putting pressure on the autonomists on the abolition issue. Thus, the republicans, with the aid of the labour movement, substantially contributed to generating a political and social atmosphere favourable to abolition.

The growth of the labour movement and the evolution of party politics probably accelerated the decomposition of slavery. The colonial administration continued to treat the labour movement very harshly, precisely because it feared that the growth of organized labour would prompt unfree labour to become more militant. The dissimilar evolution of the slave emancipation rate in Havana and Santa Clara provinces and the labour struggles of free and unfree workers on some western Cuban plantations suggest that in areas closer to centres of labour mobilization, such as Havana city, emancipation proceeded more rapidly.

After the Treaty of El Zanjón, the decline of slavery and the repressive apparatus to maintain it had a great impact on urban labour relations: it allowed labour militancy and unionism to grow and successfully improve working conditions. For instance, the largest union established after El Zanjón, the *Gremio de Obreros*, effectively transformed labour relations in the tobacco factories and workshops. To counter this tendency, employers could no longer count on the same degree of intervention from the colonial administration as before the Treaty. Tensions along class lines were so intense that people of different race and ethnicity increasingly participated in strikes together. For instance, in 1885 a coopers' strike broke out in western Cuba, and in it "The Spaniard as well as the Cuban and [the] mulatto fraternized." Even Spanish soldiers

sided with the strikers, which led the United States consul in Matanzas to conclude that,

This significant action convinced the authorities that the army could not be relied upon in an emergency; and two days after when a leader from Havana addressed the strikers here and used incendiary and threatening language, referring personally to high Government officials, and when Spaniard, Cuban, and mulatto alike cheered the speaker to the echo, then it was that the demands of the strikers were granted.<sup>32</sup>

Therefore, employers founded associations such as the *Gremio de Fabricantes de Tabaco* to better protect their interests regarding labour discipline, but, due to the strong bargaining position of tobacco workers in this period, the success of this syndicate appears to have been rather limited.

It was in this climate of class confrontation that anarchist propagandists first emerged publicly in Cuba and began to attract a growing number of workers to their side. However, the colonial administration's turn towards more repressive policies and the sudden economic crisis that began in late 1883 hindered the spread of socialism among workers. In this repressive atmosphere the reformist labour leadership attempted to counter the growth of socialism by collaborating with employers' organizations and the colonial administration. This approach failed completely, however. The administration refused to accept any of the demands of the reformists and, despite their anti-separatist propaganda, it even intensified its repressive policies against them. With the reformists severely discredited, once the economy began to grow again and Spanish liberals came back into office in the mid-1880s urban labour began to elect anarchists to the most important leadership positions in the labour movement. The disastrous role of the reformists in a very large strike by tobacco workers in 1886 further accelerated this evolution.

The end of slavery, the main barrier dividing the popular classes and the main reason for the state's extreme interventionism in labour relations, fostered the rapid expansion of the labour movement. Through the mass mobilization of people of diverse race and ethnicity, the labour movement eliminated most of the residual methods of disciplining labour from the slavery era, and contributed to the rapid transformation of colonial society. During this period, anarcho-collectivist propaganda reached a broad sector of the urban popular classes in Cuba, especially in the west of the island, but even workers in eastern towns were aware of the growth of collectivism. Colonial authorities used the exceptional

<sup>32</sup> Frank H. Pierce, consul at Matanzas, 5 March 1886, "Labor troubles in Cuba", in US Congress, House, *Reports from the Consuls of the United States, April–December, 1886*, House of Representatives, 49th Congress, 2nd Session, 1886–1887, *Miscellaneous Documents*, 55, vol. 4 (Washington, 1886), p. 266.

power that colonialism gave to the military to do whatever was possible to contain the expansion of the anarchist-led labour movement. Nevertheless, the particular approach that anarchists developed to colonial politics and class struggle outmanoeuvred both the colonial administration and the employers on several occasions. By remaining independent from any political force, the labour movement incorporated workers with divergent political sympathies, from those supporting Spanish rule, among them most lower-class *Peninsulares*, to those who yearned for an independent Cuba. Furthermore, as an independent political and social force, the labour movement developed a strong bargaining position in Cuban politics. The big strikes and lockouts that tobacco workers won in 1887 and 1888 in Havana, and in 1889 in Key West (an island off southern Florida, seventy miles from Cuba), showed workers the validity of the anarchists' approach to class struggle and colonial politics.

### CONCLUSION

The evolution of organized labour in nineteenth-century Cuba illustrates how the lower strata of society became increasingly interested in eliminating slavery, as well as in transforming the colonial status of Cuba. The situation of indentured apprentices, the *Libreta del tabaquero* and the working conditions of Peninsular *dependientes* suggest that slavery and the colonial administration hindered the struggle for better working and living conditions of juridically free labour. In its initial steps during the 1860s, the Cuban labour movement opposed the use of slave labour in factories and workshops. Despite the fact that during the Ten Years' War *Peninsulares* dominated the branch of the labour movement inside Cuba, from the 1870s on the labour movement explicitly supported abolition. In the 1880s, the two branches of the labour movement, the one inside Cuba and the one in the United States, became increasingly intertwined. Creoles could occupy leadership positions again, while non-whites increasingly began to fill the ranks. These circumstances gave new force to the labour movement, which succeeded in compelling the PLC to take on abolitionism as one of its main causes. Post-emancipation party politics and colonial reformism provided an atmosphere of greater freedom, in which the labour movement could mobilize the popular sector as it had never done before. In a few years, Cuban labour successfully fought against the residual methods of disciplining labour from the era of slavery, such as racial discrimination against non-whites and the physical punishment of apprentices and *dependientes*.