

THE RURAL WORKING CLASS IN
NINETEENTH-CENTURY ARGENTINA:
FORCED PLANTATION LABOR IN
TUCUMÁN*

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The history of the Argentine interior during the nineteenth century has often escaped the attention of researchers attracted to the dramatic economic and political growth of the eastern riverine provinces. Included in this oversight has been the plight of the rural laboring classes, unless associated with studies of immigrants.¹ It has been easier to trace the impact and lifestyles of coastal elites—the estanciero, the merchant, the caudillo, and the politician—and the urban working class, than to reconstruct the life of the provincial peon. The study of the lower classes in general has been further impeded by the dramatic but stereotyped visions of the gaucho and other rural characters immortalized by writers such as Sarmiento, Hernández, Güiraldes, and Martínez Estrada.² Finally, the illiteracy of creole workers has left us with limited personal records of their existence. Yet despite all the inconveniences involved in the study of the rural working class, it is still possible to reconstruct aspects of its social, political, and economic conditions.

There are many reasons to encourage the examination of the nineteenth-century rural working class in the interior. First, these workers were quite unlike their immigrant counterparts in the littoral. Primarily Argentine-born, they had stronger ties to the political and economic controversies of the time. The male creole worker was eligible to vote; in fact, rural male workers often comprised the largest group of registered voters.³ Isolation, illiteracy, and strong ties to his employer, however, prevented the worker from expressing himself in an independent fashion at open ballot tables.⁴ Nevertheless, the nonimmigrant working class had a long tradition of limited and often futile political participation.

Second, the creole worker in many rural areas of the interior was in great demand to perform tasks and live in places scorned by the immigrant. This was true of both permanent and seasonal jobs related to cattle raising, carting, farming, sugarcane cultivation, forestry, and cottage industries such as tanning and weaving. When a number of changes occurred in the economic patterns of the

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interior in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, the working class was among the first groups to respond to the new conditions.⁵

The development of a modern sugar industry in Tucumán, Argentina, between 1875 and 1900 provides an ideal opportunity to study the impact of economic and political change on the working class in that province. Even before 1875 Tucumán was one of the most densely populated and economically diversified provinces in Argentina. Its economic success was based upon a lively trade in cattle hides, woven blankets, lumber, locally crafted furniture, and a variety of agricultural products. Due to a series of circumstances including the repercussions of the 1873 financial crisis, the passage of higher tariffs for foreign sugar in 1875, and the linking of Tucumán to Córdoba by rail in 1876, the sugar industry soon became the principal economic activity in Tucumán and the northwest.⁶

Between 1876 and 1895 Tucumán was profoundly affected by the technologically uneven development of the sugar industry. The processing of sugar soon utilized the most modern and capital-intensive steam machinery Europe had to offer. French, German, and British manufacturers provided the latest equipment as well as trained technicians to install the machines. The thirty-four sugar factories in Tucumán could handle all phases of sugar and alcohol production with the exception of the last stages of sugar refining, which took place at the local refinery in Rosario, Santa Fe.⁷ Little labor was required in the Tucumán factories except for skilled technicians, invariably foreigners, who had highly paid jobs.

During this same time period cane cultivation increased in Tucumán from 2,178 hectares in 1876 to 55,453 hectares in 1895.⁸ By that time Tucumán supplied Argentina with 81 percent of its sugar.⁹ Despite the tremendous increase in cane cultivation and sugar production, the methods of cultivation and harvesting remained similar to those used in the sixteenth century. Almost no fertilizers or private irrigation systems were used, and the only opportunities for skilled labor in the agricultural sector consisted of traditional artisanal tasks like carpentry, blacksmithing, wagon repair, and cereal milling. Thus the modernization of the sugar industry actually prevented the creole working class from benefiting from technological advancement and relegated workers to permanent or harvest jobs that demanded strong backs and few skills.

In 1895, the first year the supply of domestic sugar equalled national consumption, thirty-one Tucumán factories, most with extensive company-owned plantations, hired approximately 16,000 harvest hands to aid their 7,000 full-time employees, most of whom worked as day laborers or artisans.¹⁰ Of these 23,000 workers, at least 75 percent, or 17,250, were affected by local labor legislation. These workers, along with their counterparts employed on nonindustrial plantations, swelled the ranks of unskilled laborers in Tucumán.¹¹

The labor necessities of the agricultural sector of the sugar industry were quite unlike those of more traditional economic pursuits in that province. Stock raising was land, rather than labor intensive. The weaving industry, in decline since the late eighteenth century, primarily employed women who worked at

home. Furniture, wagon, and building construction attracted a renowned urban artisan class, many of whom migrated from Tucumán after 1873 or went to work on sugar plantations.¹² Nonsugarcane farming was managed by independent farmers who worked their own lands with occasional outside help at harvest time. Sugar, in contrast to all these activities, was much more labor intensive.

Since the labor needs of traditional rural industries were so different, their decline did not release a suitable labor pool for sugar. Equally important, Tucumán did not have a highly developed postindependence tradition of latifundias, replete with servile Indians, blacks, or creole peons, which could have been modified for the sugar industry. Thus the persistent need to attract labor, along with the concomitant need to maintain social order among plantation workers, forced Tucumán elites to demand new labor laws.

Ideally, nineteenth-century Tucumán plantation owners had wanted to hire Europeans. They discovered rather quickly, however, that sugarcane cultivation did not appeal to European immigrants who preferred to stay in the littoral. Between 1874 and 1886 the yearly influx of Europeans to Tucumán ranged from twenty-one in 1878 to 1,147 in 1885. By 1895 only 4.9 percent of Tucumán's population was foreign born in contrast to the national average of 25.5 percent.¹³ Consequently the sugar industry became dependent upon creole labor.

Since Tucumán simply did not have enough local labor to meet sugar's needs, plantation owners hired *conchabadores*, or labor recruiters, who went out to nearby provinces with surplus labor pools such as Santiago del Estero, La Rioja, and Catamarca. There the conchabador looked for tribes of docile Indians or large creole families. He would then sign an agreement with the tribal *caciques* or with the head of the family, and often advanced these men small amounts of money or sugarcane brandy. The cacique or family head then took his charges to Tucumán to work for the year, or merely for the season, depending upon the contract. Women and children followed the men. The women were paid a minimal salary if they would cook for bachelors as well as for their own family, and some women also worked the harvest. Children toiled at reduced pay alongside the adults. During the harvest season they all worked seven days a week from sunup to sunset with two hours off at lunch.¹⁴

The conchabador served an important function by finding new laborers who would not have otherwise migrated to Tucumán. Between 1878 and 1885 national military officials aware of the labor shortage in Tucumán further augmented the number of workers there by sending shipments of Indians captured during the conquest of the desert. Special contracts were drawn up for these captives placing them under the local Defender of the Children and Poor, and authorizing plantation owners to pay them abnormally low wages as "apprentices."¹⁵ The fate of these Indians was malnutrition, death, or escape.¹⁶

As the sugar industry continued to expand and provide work that helped sustain the entire northwest, peons began to migrate voluntarily from economically depressed neighboring provinces. In an effort to control the movement of new arrivals as well as make sure that all available laborers were under contract to work for someone, employers learned to depend upon the strict enforcement

of police codes whose provisions specifically dealt with day laborers. Traditionally, Argentine police had the sanctions to maintain social order. Almost every province had police codes that specified how to control the working class. Tucumán's police codes of 1856 and 1877 made it incumbent upon them to keep written records of the whereabouts of all day laborers in the province and to make sure they had signed contracts.¹⁷ The employer, under these codes, could use these contractual arrangements to create debt peonage. He could also inflict corporal punishment under certain conditions. If workers ran away, it was the duty of the police to capture them.

These police codes, however, did not contain enough statutes to deal with day-to-day problems caused by the ever increasing number of workers who flocked to Tucumán. At first the upper class, which controlled the legislature, tried to control the movement of the working class by preventing workers from entering cafes and other public places where their presence might disturb Tucumán's elite. Street begging was prohibited by law. Soon increased numbers of policemen patrolled the countryside to arrest drunken or runaway workers whose petty crimes drove them into the city prison. Industrialists and city inhabitants wanted workers to come to Tucumán, but they cringed at the social consequences of the presence of a migratory work force.¹⁸

By 1888 there were so many complaints about the inadequacy of the old police code and its treatment of workers that provincial legislators wrote a separate code to deal with the working class. This *Ley de Conchabos*, or Servants' Law, appeared to be more enlightened than its predecessor as it eliminated corporal punishment, obliged the employer to inform the worker when a new contract had been drawn up, and limited the amount of indebtedness that could be incurred by a worker to one-quarter of the total value of his or her contract. The new laws applied to anyone who did not own property or who worked for less than fifty pesos per month.¹⁹ The burden of enforcement once again fell upon the police. Besides chasing runaway workers, police officers had to keep three sets of books, the first of which listed the names of all registered workers, a second that recorded the names of runaways, and a third that indicated which peons had been granted leaves of absence from work. Further, police had to issue identification booklets to all workers.²⁰

Despite attempts to prohibit certain forms of physical coercion, the *Ley de Conchabos* was perhaps more onerous than its predecessor. Peons and domestic servants, unless already employed, found themselves working for whomsoever the police selected. If they chose to strike, which rarely occurred, they could be arrested for vagrancy.²¹ Wages remained relatively constant throughout the duration of this law in order to maintain the fifty-peso limit. Finally, the provisions that restricted the behavior of employers were rarely enforced. Thus from 1888 until its repeal in 1896, the *Ley de Conchabos* allowed cane cultivators to keep workers in a state of contractual servitude.

Mark Jefferson, a North American geographer who worked at La Providencia sugar factory in Tucumán from 1886 to 1889, later wrote how the *Ley de Conchabos* as well as the modernization of the sugar industry had affected the working class. As far as cruelty toward workers, Jefferson claimed:

Punishments did not belong to the patriarchal institutions of Creole days but grew out of the attempt to apply them to modern manufacturing. [José Ruiz] was the last man whipped in that establishment and the next to last man put into the stocks. The patron class was violent in moments of passion but not cruel enough to use such methods of obliging men to work. In 1888 the establishments were forbidden to use other coercive measures than confinement in a strong room, and this only for a limited time. The only persistent cause of difficulty with the men was drunkenness.²²

Jefferson also believed that the lack of adequate medical care on plantations also came as a consequence of the more modern sugar industry:

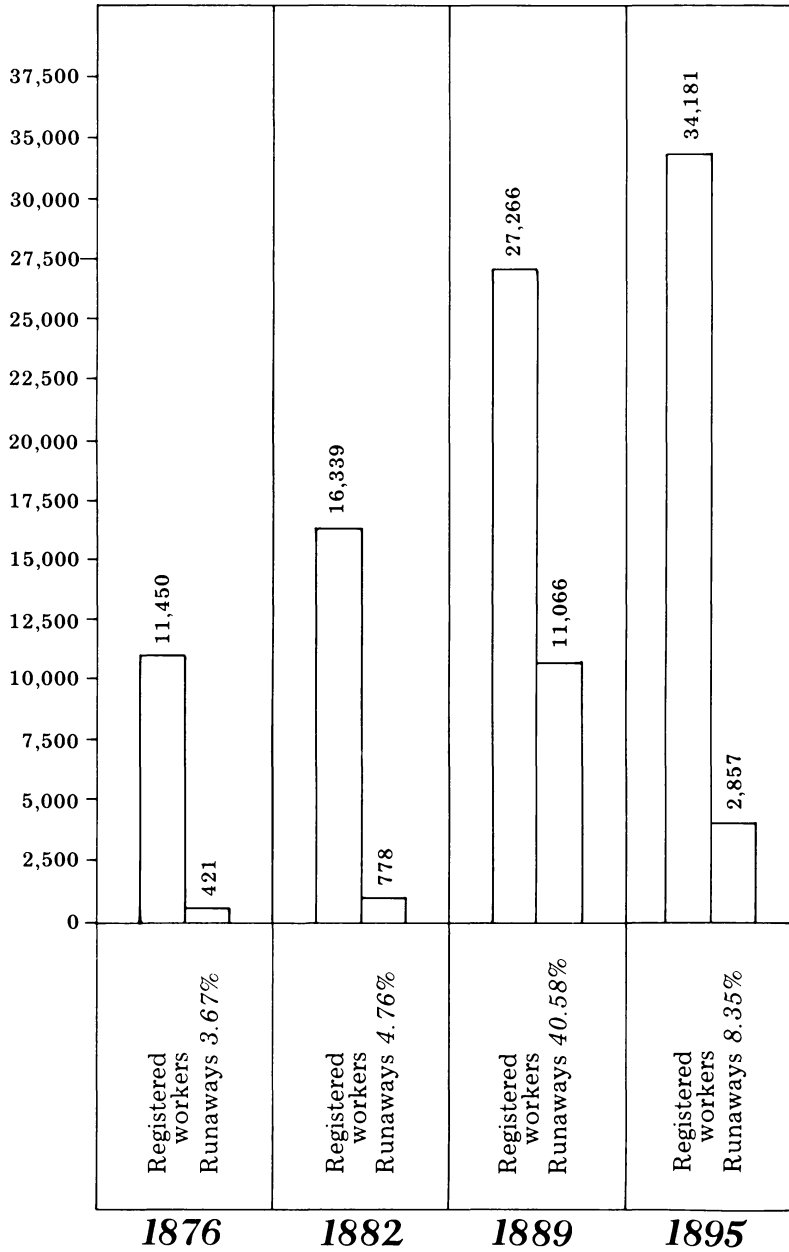
Creole institutions assumed that the privileged upper class would use its superior intelligence and resources to care for the peon in all emergencies. This the peon might claim as a right. The mistress on a large estate had the health of a great number of families in her hands. This care was a religious obligation. In the factory no patroness was assumed to be present. The care of the men became a matter of business. A sick man could not work, and so he presented himself at the office if able to be up and stated his complaint, and the bookkeeper or the superior official would supply ipecac, castor oil, epsom salts, camphorated oil, or other simple remedies; quinine was used almost constantly. These remedies were administered on the spot, and the offer of them had occasionally the effect of persuading the man that perhaps he might as well go to work.²³

The number of workers affected by these changes in Tucumán continued to increase as the resident population doubled between 1869 and 1895, most of the growth due to the influx of male laborers from nearby provinces.²⁴ It was these workers who maintained the oligarchical system with their labor in the sugar fields and their votes in the ballot boxes, apparently without protests such as strikes or uprisings on the plantations.

Does the passivity of the creole worker mean that he did not respond to the social, political, and economic conditions in Tucumán? If not, how can we find out how the laborer reacted to his environment when there are few personal accounts of his life? One method is to examine official reports about the working class. Because the police and the legal system defined the liberties and obligations of this group, their records provide a wealth of information. For example, figure 1 indicates the number of workers registered in comparison to the number of runaways in 1876, 1882, 1889, and 1895.²⁵ It is interesting to note that the largest number of runaways was reported the year after the passage of the Ley de Conchabos, a fact that might have indicated great dissatisfaction on the part of workers to the implementation of the laws or greater efforts on the part of the police to return runaways. In either case, the laborer immediately felt the consequences of this law.

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Figure 1. Number of Registered Workers & Number of Reported Runaways



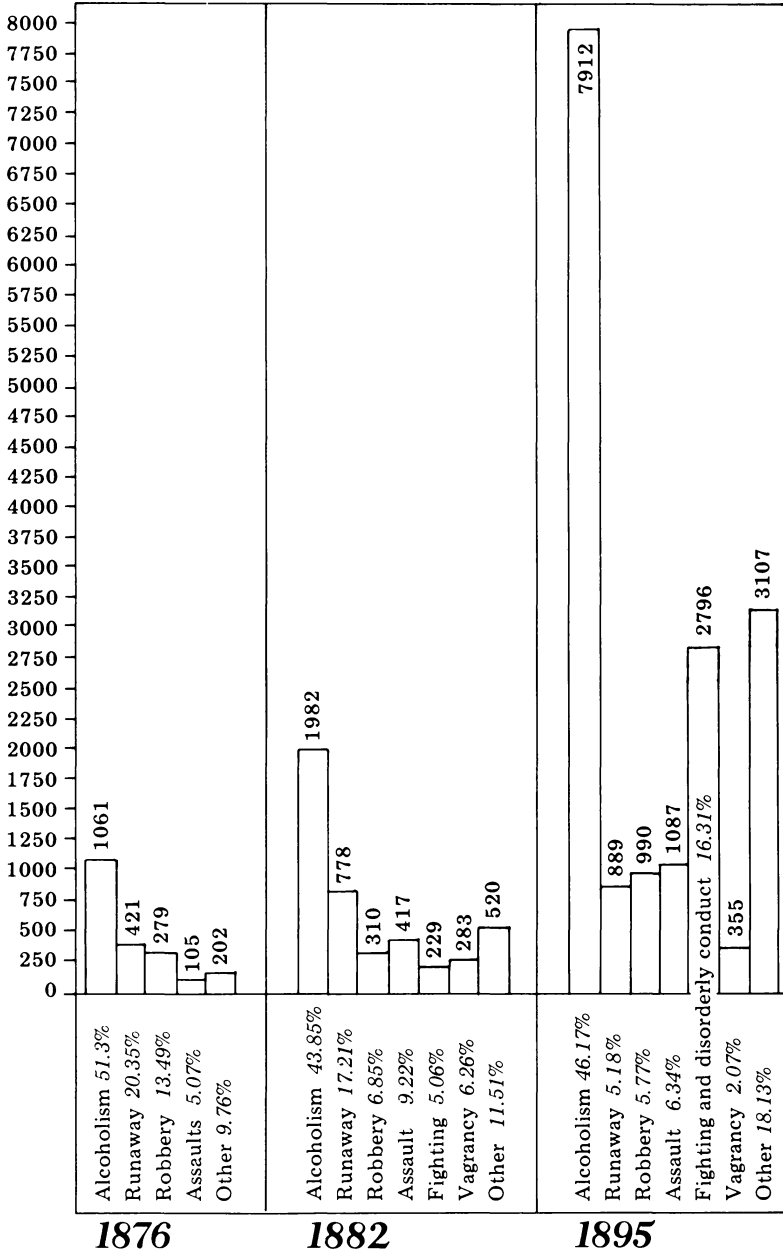
During the period between 1876 and 1895 the number of arrests in Tucumán, ones that involved mostly illiterate workers, increased from under two thousand to more than seventeen thousand per year, while the total population just about doubled. This meant that the incidence of social disorder far exceeded the population growth rate. Figure 2, also based upon official sources, reports the number of arrests and the nature of the complaint.²⁶ These figures indicate a constant and high incidence of arrests for alcoholism, a fact already mentioned by Jefferson. After the passage of the 1888 law there appears to have been an increase in disorderly conduct as well as an eventual decline in the number of runaways. Although these figures are only available for selected years and can be questioned for their reliability, they raise points about behavioral patterns that might be further studied through court cases found in judicial archives and from more impressionistic sources.

Besides legal records, other kinds of sources testify to the impact of the sugar industry upon rural workers. Travellers' accounts such as those of Mark Jefferson, Eduardo Quintero, and Emile Daireaux relate items such as living conditions, salaries, and lifestyles of peons.²⁷ Provincial and national censuses also indicate salaries, typical occupations, levels of literacy, nationality, and types of diseases common to workers and their children.²⁸

Plantation records, where available, provide further insights into the lives of plantation workers. The San Pablo factory inventories, for example, verify the official reports of increased runaways in 1889. Inventories from 1884 to 1890 show also that salary advances to peons increased significantly after 1888 along with a high proportion of outstanding wage debts due to runaways (see table below).²⁹ As early as 1887 bookkeepers at San Pablo automatically began to subtract 50 percent of the debts incurred by runaways as uncollectable debts. This practice continued after the passage of the Ley de Conchabos. Thus, despite the increase in arrests within the province, the owners of San Pablo continued to calculate that at least one half of their runaways would not be returned.

<i>Salary Advances 1884–1890</i>		
<i>Year</i>	<i>Advances for Employees and Peons</i>	<i>Advances to Runaways</i>
1884	13,420.08 M/N	3,043.35 M/N
1885	12,982.21	4,653.71
1886	14,103.62	6,662.74
1887	15,593.78	5,890.84
1888	11,427.34	5,679.90
1889	14,595.93	11,480.51
1890	17,525.40	10,917.32

Figure 2. Number of Arrests by Nature of Complaint



One final source of statistical information that remains to be analyzed is unofficial contemporary statistical reports. Juan Biale Masse, for example, travelled around Argentina at the turn of the century and examined the health of regional workers as well as their social and political conditions. In his report on Tucumán, Biale Masse examined laborers on selected plantations and factories and tried to help organize a Socialist strike to demand better living conditions. At that time, as in the late nineteenth century, the lack of work elsewhere inhibited workers contemplating strikes.³⁰

For nonstatistical information, folklore and music—sources often left untapped by historians—also tell a story about the life of the lower classes in Tucumán by the kinds of songs that were sung as well as their content. Folklorists have noted that in contrast to the rich musical tradition preserved in Tucumán since the colonial period, few songs have been preserved from the nineteenth century that are not patriotic or political in nature. Tucumán has no work songs, and few songs indicate that a sugar industry existed there in the nineteenth century.³¹ This offers a sharp contrast to contemporary Caribbean plantation cultures rich in folkloric tradition. Legislation that kept traveling musicians out of the plantation areas in order to keep the peons at work partially account for this lacuna.³² The rapidity of change in Tucumán might have also worked to prevent a sugar folklore tradition. In any case, the cultural barrenness of Tucumán's experience with sugar must be added to sugar's social and political impact on the working class.³³

This brief description shows that it is possible to study the history of the rural creole laborer in the Argentine interior in the late nineteenth century, and that it is quite different from that of the immigrant in the littoral. Caught in a relatively inflexible situation brought about by the uneven application of technology to the sugar industry, the creole worker there had few alternatives except to work under the conditions imposed by the sugar oligarchy. Already capable of voting, the native worker found no relief from the political system and evidently unleashed frustration in drunken and disorderly behavior. The European immigrant, in contrast, could return home if conditions were unsuitable, and remained almost completely outside the electoral system.

Other regions and economic activities—the grape and pastoral industries of Mendoza, the forestry industry in the northeast, the farming activities outside the littoral—as well as the lack of work in other places all affected the creole worker in ways that separated him from the immigrant. Internal migration, always a possibility, worked to keep the rural worker in the interior until the twentieth century. Once this pattern changed, however, the internal migration to Buenos Aires helped integrate two divergent traditions within the working class. Further studies of these patterns would be useful not only to students of Argentina, but also for comparison with other Latin American countries. It would also be helpful to women's studies as it could trace how changes in agriculture and cottage industries in areas like Tucumán, without the development of labor-intensive urban factories, prevented working class women from participating fully in dominant economic activities. Instead women were relegated to positions of field cooks, domestic servants, laundresses, or underpaid

harvest laborers. Finally, such studies would dispell the myth and stereotypes that surround the rural working class in Argentina.

NOTES

1. Studies that deal with immigrant rural workers include James R. Scobie, *Revolution on the Pampas: A Social History of Argentine Wheat, 1860–1910* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1964); Mark Jefferson, *Peopling the Argentine Pampa*, Research Series No. 16 (New York: American Geographical Society, 1926); and Carl Solberg, "Farm Workers and the Myth of Export-Led Development in Argentina," *The Americas* 31:2 (October 1974): 121–38.
2. Domingo F. Sarmiento, *Facundo* (Mexico: UNAM, 1957); José Hernández, *Martín Fierro* (Buenos Aires: SUR, 1962); Ricardo Güiraldes, *Don Segundo Sombra*, 21st ed. (Buenos Aires: Editorial Losada, 1939); Ezequiel Martínez Estrada, *X-Ray of the Pampa*, trans. Alain Swietlicki (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1971).
3. Germán O. E. Tjarks, Olga G. d'Agostino, Hebe G. de Bargeró, Laura B. Jany, Ana E. Magnavacca, María Haydée Martín, Elena Rebok, María Susana Stein, "Aspectos cuantitativos del estado económico y social de la ciudadanía argentina potencialmente votante (1860–1890)," *Boletín de Instituto de Historia "Dr. Emilio Ravignani"* 11:18–19 (1969):31–33.
4. *Ibid.*
5. José Carlos Chiaramonte, *Nacionalismo y liberalismo económicos en Argentina 1860–1880* (Buenos Aires: Solar Hachette, 1971), pp. 45–68; 91–120.
6. Donna J. Guy, "Tucumán Sugar Politics and the Generation of Eighty," *The Americas* 32:4 (April 1976):568.
7. *Ibid.*, passim.
8. Donna J. Guy, "Argentine Sugar Politics: Tucumán and the Generation of Eighty," unpublished manuscript, diagram B-2: Land Dedicated to Agriculture, Tucumán 1874–1900, p. 356.
9. Tucumán produced 109,253 metric tons out of a national total of 130,000 metric tons, sufficient to meet all domestic needs.
10. Compiled from provincial census figures and estimates of factories that failed to report the number of workers employed; Ramón Cordeiro, Carlos Dalmiro Viale, Horacio Sánchez Loria, and Ernesto del Moral, eds., *Compilación ordenada de leyes, decretos, y mensajes del período constitucional de la provincia de Tucumán que comienza en el año 1852*, 33 vols. (Tucumán: Prebisch y Violeto, 1915–1919), 20, n.p., "Datos generales sobre la zafra de 1895–1896." Hereinafter referred to as *Compilación*.
11. See Fig. 1 for total number of registered workers that year.
12. Paul Groussac, Alfredo Bousquet, Inocencio Liberani, Dr. Juan M. Terán, and Dr. Javier Frías, *Memoria histórica y descriptiva de la provincia de Tucumán* (Buenos Aires: M. Biedma, 1882), pp. 529–33.
13. Letter of Eudoro Avellaneda to National Immigration Commission, 13 January 1873, Tucumán Province, *Boletín Oficial* 25 (1873):193; Tucumán Province, *Anuario estadístico de la provincia de Tucumán* (Tucumán: 1895–), 1895, 1:302; Argentine Republic, Comisión Directiva del Censo, *Segundo Censo de la República Argentina*, 3 vols. (Buenos Aires: Taller Tip. de la Penitenciaria Nacional, 1898), 2:527.
14. Emile Daireaux, *Vida y costumbres en el Plata*, 2 vols. (Buenos Aires: Felix Lajouane, 1888), 2:439; Manuel García Soriano, "La condición social del trabajador en Tucumán durante el siglo XIX," *Revisión Histórica* 1:1 (May 1960):28; Alejandro Gancedo, *Memoria descriptiva de la provincia de Santiago del Estero* (Buenos Aires: Stiller and Laass, 1885), pp. 127–28. The work hours for all were standardized by the Police Codes and later by the Ley de Conchabos and harvest work hours differed from regular work hours by an additional rest hour at noon.
15. Contract of 8 December 1878, *Compilación* 10:252–53.

16. *Ibid.*, pp. 255–56; Manuel García Soriano, “El trabajo de los indios en los ingenios azucareros de Tucumán,” *Revista de la Junta de Estudios Históricos de Tucumán* 2:2 (July 1969):120–24.
17. 1856 Police Code, chap. 6, *Compilación* 1:413–14; 1877 Police Code, sect. 5, *Compilación* 6:368–74.
18. Decree prohibiting begging on the streets, 28 May 1877, *Compilación* 6:348–49.
19. 1888 Ley de Conchabos, *Compilación* 12: 326–75.
20. *Ibid.*, pp. 327–28.
21. *Ibid.*, p. 328.
22. Jefferson, *Peopling*, p. 35.
23. *Ibid.*, pp. 35–36.
24. The 1895 census listed 35,281 residents of Tucumán out of a total population of 215,742 who claimed nearby provinces as their birthplaces. Since the census was taken before the harvest season, it did not include those who migrated for seasonal employment. The census also did not distinguish how many of the native Tucumán residents had parents who had migrated to Tucumán. Argentine Republic, *Segundo Censo Nacional* 2: 540–41.
25. Part C of Governor’s Annual Message, 1 January 1877, *Compilación* 6:285; “Movement of Indentured Peons and Domestic Servants in Tucumán during 1882, Tucumán Province,” *Registro estadístico correspondiente al año 1882* (Buenos Aires: Coni, 1884), p. 77; “Movement of Indentured Servants During the Year 1888–1889,” in Paulino Rodríguez Marquina, “Memoria descriptiva de Tucumán. Su industria, su presente, su pasado y porvenir estadístico,” 3 vols., unpublished manuscript, 2: 280; Tucumán Province, *Anuario*, 1895, 2: 462–63.
26. Part C, Governor’s Annual Message, *Compilación* 6: 285; “Criminal Statistics, Admissions to the Police Jail of Tucumán City During 1882 According to Crimes, Sex and Education of Delinquents, Tucumán Province,” *Registro estadístico, 1882*, p. 93; Tucumán Province, *Anuario*, 1895, 2: 112–15.
27. Jefferson, *Peopling*, pp. 35–36; Eduardo Quintero, *Ocho días en Tucumán* (Buenos Aires: M. Biedma, 1877), p. 26; and Daireaux, *Vida y costumbres* 2:489.
28. The three national censuses were taken in 1869, 1895, and 1914. In addition the Argentine Congress also has an official report on Tucumán; Argentine Republic, Cámara de Diputados, Comisión de Agricultura y Colonización, *Investigación parlamentaria sobre agricultura, ganadería, industrias derivadas y colonización. Anexo G: Tucumán y Santiago del Estero* por Antonio M. Correa. Revisado y aumentado por Emilio Lahitte (Buenos Aires: Tip. de la Penitenciaría Nacional, 1898).
29. San Pablo Factory, *Inventario I, 1876–1890*, pp. 142, 163, 184, 203, 228, 252, and 275. I wish to thank Sr. José María Nougés for lending me this document.
30. Juan Bialek Masse, *El estado de las clases obreras argentinas a comienzos del siglo*, Prólogo y notas de Luis A. Despontin, 2nd ed. (Córdoba: Universidad Nacional de Córdoba, 1904–1968), pp. 141–63; 499–538.
31. Isabel Aretz-Thiele, *Música tradicional argentina. Tucumán. Historia y folklore* (Buenos Aires: Universidad Nacional de Tucumán, 1946), p. 77.
32. Juan Alfonso Carrizo, *Cancionero popular de Tucumán*, 2 vols. (Buenos Aires: A. Baiocco y Cía., 1937) 1:11, 314. Arretz-Thiele, *Música*, p. 75.
33. See also the association of superstitious tales with certain sugar barons, María Eugenia Valentié, “El familiar,” *Ensayos y Estudios: Revista de Filosofía y Cultura* (Tucumán) 2:3 (1973):26, 29, 35–36.