



Review: [Untitled]

Reviewed Work(s):

Fighting Slavery in the Caribbean: The Life and Times of a British Family in Nineteenth-Century Havana by Luis Martínez-Fernández

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hand, the idea that the purpose of U.S. police aid—much less its actual outcome—could have been that of “gaining control” of the internal security systems of twenty-three Latin American governments would attribute to U.S. policy makers a level of self-delusive ambition that probably not even they deserve. The implication—repeatedly suggested but never demonstrated in the case of Brazil—that the United States was in fact steadily “gaining control” of foreign police forces fantastically overstates the complaisance, if not the stupidity, of the governments that received U.S. police aid.

Huggins provides no evidence that the United States ever even sought “control” of Brazil’s police system, let alone that it acquired such control; nor does she demonstrate Washington’s connection with what she calls “devolution.” That the United States tried to institutionalize its influence over military-dominated or controlled governments, like those of Brazil, by supplying free or cheap equipment and services to the military and police was a frequently and publicly acknowledged goal of U.S. “security assistance” to Latin America. It may be easy to agree with Huggins that a policy of supplying repression to such bloody-handed governments was repulsive and indefensible. But she squanders the reader’s natural sympathy for her position by failing to provide either an empirical analysis or an interpretation worthy of this important but still-obscurer subject.

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LUIS MARTÍNEZ-FERNÁNDEZ. *Fighting Slavery in the Caribbean: The Life and Times of a British Family in Nineteenth-Century Havana*. (Latin American Realities.) Armonk, N.Y.: M. E. Sharpe. 1998. Pp. xiv, 200.

According to the nineteenth-century German scientist and traveler, Alexander von Humboldt, Spanish laws in Cuba permitted a high degree of manumission, making Cuban slavery flexible and endowing slaves with extraordinary rights (*The Island of Cuba* [1856]). Cuba’s complex social and economic dynamics relegated African slaves to the bottom of the hierarchy, but many freed and enslaved Africans were able to attain various advantages in the system depending on their skills or personal relationships. The island’s growing plantation base and service economy created a high demand for laborers, and the demand for slaves outstripped supply. Many land holders turned to Mexicans, indigenous populations, and Asian indentured servants. Some rented slaves from others or relied on the services of the small but growing free population of color. By mid-century, the incentive for the trafficking of African slaves remained great. Havana, Cuba’s capital, had become a bustling multicultural, multi-ethnic port city with a growing population, although as late as the 1840s, slaves accounted for more than forty percent of the island’s total population.

Although Cuba did not abolish slavery until 1886, by

the second decade of the nineteenth century, slavery was under attack in various quarters, and the Spanish declared the slave trade illegal in 1820. Opposition to slavery in Cuba took many forms, from slave rebellions and sabotage to international treaties to reduce the sale of human cargo. The British, who had abolished slavery early in the century, played an important role in urging the Cuban economy toward free labor through a number of forums including the Anglo-Spanish treaties of 1817 and 1835 and, more specifically, the jointly staffed Spanish Mixed Commission for the Suppression of the Slave Trade in Sierra Leone and Havana.

This well-written book by Luis Martínez-Fernández recounts the story of George Canning Backhouse, who was sent to Cuba by the British government to serve as the British judge on the Mixed Commission in Havana. Backhouse traveled to the island in 1853 with his wife, Alice Grace Catherine, and their young son of six months; the family would remain there until 1855. The Backhouses left behind a rich trail of documents, including official papers, letters, and diaries, which constitute the major primary sources used to construct the narrative.

Martínez-Fernández provides readers with a fascinating look into life in nineteenth-century Cuba from the perspective of these British expatriates. The Backhouses’ views on life in Havana are filled with stereotypical European comments of life in the tropics, but they also reveal important insights into Cuban lifestyles, social relations, economics, and culture that makes this an important book.

This work is not about “fighting slavery in the Caribbean,” as the title suggests, however. Nor is it necessarily about fighting slavery in Cuba. Indeed, there is little information on Backhouse’s actual battles or the day-to-day duties of an antislavery judge. Rather, the British family’s views of Cuban life in the middle of the nineteenth century provide a window unto the broader political, cultural, and social climate, presenting details of everyday life for many sectors of the Cuban population, as well as some of the expatriates who found themselves in Cuba. Details of George’s hectic and troubled life and his eventual death on the island also reveal much about the inadequacies of British and Cuban institutions.

The author includes many illustrations, photographs, and drawings of streets, plazas, homes, and individuals from Cuba. Many provide helpful visual images for references, but others such as the photograph of the “slave posing in stocks” (p. 44) or the women peering through the bars from a residential property (p. 72) do not necessarily contribute to the narrative. The reproduction of the print of a *ñanigo*, a member of an Afro-Cuban secret society, in the discussion of George’s death (p. 147) also seems out of place particularly since the author dismisses the claim that the society might have had a role in that death. Furthermore, none of the illustrations are dated, and

many of the references to them are not included in the bibliography.

Illustrations aside, Martínez-Fernández offers a fresh, compelling narrative that will be important (and interesting) to students of all disciplines. The narrative, which is divided into eight discreet chapters, is so well conceived that by the end of the narrative, we care about the historical characters. The author provides readers with detailed descriptions of individuals who come in contact with the Backhouses, whether it is the wet nurse who is hired to feed the Backhouses' sick child while neglecting her own, George's inept British assistant, or corrupt Cuban businessmen; all come together to help us reconstruct what life was like in nineteenth-century Havana in all its glory and decadence.

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JOAN CASANOVAS. *Bread, or Bullets! Urban Labor and Spanish Colonialism in Cuba, 1850–1898*. (Pitt Latin American Series.) Pittsburgh, Pa.: University of Pittsburgh Press. 1998. Pp. xiii, 320. Cloth \$45.00, paper \$19.95.

This book examines a topic that has received little attention by historians of nineteenth-century Cuba. Not since Jean Stubbs's *Tobacco on the Periphery: A Case Study in Cuban Labour History, 1860–1958*, (1985) has there been a monograph in English on the status of free urban workers in the nineteenth century. Therefore, Joan Casanovas's study of the evolution of Cuba's labor movement during the last half of the nineteenth century, and its impact on Spanish colonialism, is a welcomed contribution to the historiography of Cuba. He has successfully expanded on Stubbs's work, reconstructing a more detailed history of how working-class Cubans, specifically tobacco workers in Havana and its suburbs, sought to improve their lives during the period in which Cuba moved from a slave society to a post-emancipation society. Unlike Stubbs, he also explores how this labor movement affected the colonial relationship as well as how the political and economic developments in Spain influenced Cuban workers.

Casanovas argues that by the end of the 1880s, most cigar makers employed in Cuba's largest urban industry, acting as the vanguard for the working class, had discarded the reformist populism developed by the 1860s to improve their lives, and appropriated a more radical ideology influenced by Spanish anarchism. Urban workers then became better organized and successful in gaining concessions from their employers as well as from the colonial authorities. The labor movement's initial successes heightened workers' expectations. Realizing that their aspirations were incompatible with the reactionary and repressive nature of Spanish colonialism, workers became supporters of the independence movement beginning in 1895.

Examining this process between 1800–1880, Casano-

vas discovered that race and nationality affected the emergence of an identifiable working class, its organization, and its subsequent effectiveness as a movement to improve the lives of Cuba's working men and women, white as well as non-white. Spanish colonialism also affected the development of a viable labor movement before 1880. In protecting African slavery and other forms of coerced labor and reinforcing the socioeconomic and political boundaries of a caste system, urban workers found themselves racially and occupationally segregated. Colonialism prompted Afro-Cubans, whites, and later Asian workers and artisans to establish their own racially and occupationally exclusive mutual aid societies for economic assistance and recreational purposes. Creole and peninsular elites established numerous cultural institutions too. The number and importance of these organizations increased as the tobacco industry expanded, as the urban work force increased, and as Cuba experienced an economic crisis during the 1850s. The elites used their associations to influence the colonial government to change its commercial policies and to reform the political system. Workers' societies served to soften the shock of unemployment. Casanovas convincingly demonstrates that the first labor organizations to emerge by the early 1860s did so out of these elite-worker-artisan benevolent associations.

The first labor organizations of the 1860s were informed by reformist populism. This ideology advanced the notion that Cuban workers had the right to establish cooperatives and trade unions, to bargain collectively, to elect delegates for this reason, and to gain an education. Some populists went further and introduced the socialism of Charles Fourier and others into their platform as well as discussing the germaneness of the international labor movement to Cuban workers. By 1868 and the first War for Cuban Independence, white and black artisans had responded to the populism of such reformists as Saturnino Martínez.

The Ten Years' War (1868–1878) also helped the labor movement to evolve. Thousands of workers left Cuba for the United States as victims of a paranoid and reactionary colonial government that attacked supporters of reformist populism and independence. In the U.S., they used their associations to fund the separatist cause not only at this time but also during the postwar period, 1878–1895.

The Treaty of Zanjón that ended the war created a liberal social and political atmosphere that encouraged the spread of collectivist-anarchism and its strategies of class struggle between 1882–1886. Casanovas's examination of this period is the strength of the book. Employing a rich and diverse collection of archival material from Spain, Cuba, and the United States, Casanovas meticulously intersects the critical events and developments surrounding the anarchist and communist labor movements in Spain with the Cuban movement. More importantly, he demonstrates that Cubans became very selective in this process. Enrique Roig San Martín and others guided Cuban workers to