

## **Book Review: The Social Transformation of Eighteenth-Century Cuba**

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Johnson, Sherry. *The Social Transformation of Eighteenth-Century Cuba*. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2001. 267 pp. \$55.00 (cloth).

Latin American colonial historiography has focused largely on Mexico and Peru as indicative of Spanish American realities because of their economic, political, and social influence. But the mainland experience was vastly different from that of the Caribbean, particularly Cuba, a hub of maritime traffic between Spain and America. In turn, the dominance of slavery and sugar in Cuba's historiography has obscured other processes, patterns, and influences on the island during its over four hundred-year colonial past. Not until the nineteenth century did sugar plantations come to dominate the island's economy and leave their mark on the landscape. The concurrent demand for slaves to work these enterprises dramatically increased Cuba's African population to the point where they became the majority by the middle of the century. Yet prior to the nineteenth century, Cuba was a very different place. By exploring the military reforms in eighteenth-century Cuba and the influx of *peninsulares* (Spaniards born in the Iberian peninsula) during the last third of the century, Sherry Johnson reveals diverse economic pursuits and a population of predominantly European descent largely dependent on Spanish military investment. She argues that Spanish immigration to Cuba between 1763 and 1800 not only greatly outnumbered African immigration, but it was also the main engine driving social change on the island. But her book *The Social Transformation of Eighteenth-Century Cuba* does more than just warn against the monocultural myopia of sugar and slavery; it also repositions Cuba within the broader context of Latin American colonial relations. She argues that Cuba, more than Mexico or Peru, was Spain's darling in the late eighteenth century, a privileged position that sustained Cubans' loyalty to Spain long after other colonies had declared their independence.

After England invaded and occupied Havana from 1762 to 1763, Spain made a concerted effort to ensure it would never lose this critical port to another European nation again. To this end, the crown sent Alejandro O'Reilly to the island to institute military reforms. The salaries, *fueros* (judicial privileges), and increased prestige of serving in Cuba's armed forces attracted *peninsulares*, Creoles (Spaniards born in the colonies), and people of color to its ranks. Johnson argues, "With perhaps the exception of slaves, almost all

benefited from the increased military presence" (p. 16). The dramatic influx of *peninsulares* who came to serve in the military altered Cuba's social life. Marriages between these *peninsulares* and Creole daughters and the creolization of the military facilitated close ties between Cuba and Spain; unlike the rest of Latin America, Cuban Creoles enjoyed an elevated status in the eyes of the Crown. That one third of all marriages between 1753 and 1800 in Havana were between *peninsulares* and Creoles reduced the Creole stigma there. Cuba was one of the only areas in the Spanish empire where those born in colonies benefited from privileges generally guarded closely by *peninsulares*. Even if they were not explicitly recognized as equals, many came to believe they were. Since the island's Creoles perceived themselves to be European and therefore *blanco* (white), they tended to associate themselves more with Spain's inhabitants than their geographically closer *mestizo*, indigenous, and African counterparts in Spanish America. Even after a new governor, Luis de las Casas (1790–96), disrupted the social pact between the island and Spain by favoring merchants and sugar interests to the detriment of the military, families who had been affected by militarization remained loyal to the Crown.

Because Las Casas's government was so ineffective and unpopular and he alienated the military, by the end of his term, Cuba was on the brink of rebellion. Unrest developed among the lower classes because they lost the opportunity to empower themselves through the military. At the same time, defiance and resistance spread at many levels; often captains who were caught between their charges and Las Casas's tyranny sided with their constituents and circumvented government mandates. Some, such as Captain Antonio José Morejón, became local heroes in the process. In this way, Johnson's revisionist history shows that many Cubans resisted the expansion of the sugar economy because they associated it with Las Casas, not necessarily because of a conscious disdain for the international market economy. And from a political standpoint, Las Casas's reign signaled the end of Cuba's preferential relationship with Spain. Even though the efforts of Joaquin Beltrán de Santa Cruz and Francisco de Montalvo averted anarchy and restored imperial order in the wake of Las Casas' destructive rule, Spain's investment in the island had been reduced and Cuban denizens' status had been diminished in the eyes of the Crown. By the early nineteenth century, *peninsulares* no longer held Cuban Creoles in greater esteem than their counterparts in the rest of Spanish America. Concurrently,

the economy was moving away from its intimate links with Spain and becoming more dependent on the United States. Nonetheless, the militarization of Cuba left an indelible mark on the families who were affected by it. Their loyalty towards Spain and the honor of their ancestors who were brought up in the Spanish military tradition continued well into the nineteenth century.

Johnson adeptly argues that this legacy of loyalty stunted independence movements in Cuba. Yet the thoroughness with which she pursues the development of Cuban loyalty to Spain is not emulated in her study of *Cubanidad* (Cubanness), an ideology distinguished by the Creole intellectual Félix Varela and his disciples that was rooted in Cuban pride and anti-Spanish sentiments. She does not explain how Cuba's heritage of loyalty to Spain was converted into its own sense of identity. To be fair, an examination of this ideology may be beyond the scope of *The Social Transformation of Eighteenth-Century Cuba*, but when Johnson broaches the topic, the reader hopes for a fuller explanation especially since *Cubanidad* was a critical component in Cuba's independence movements that erupted in 1868 and again in 1895. And Johnson's assertion that "This research has sought to give voice to el pueblo and demonstrate that the ideology of Cubanidad (Cubanness) took its roots in eighteenth-century demographic and social forces" (p. 190) seems to miss the mark, if not contradict her findings. Her empirical data and analysis convincingly establish a cause and effect relationship between eighteenth-century demographic and social forces and Cuban loyalty to Spain, but not between these forces and *Cubanidad*. Most Cuban Creoles did not develop a sense of *Cubanidad* in the eighteenth century even after they lost their elevated status in the empire. Yet this shortcoming does not undermine her central argument that military reforms brought about social change on the island well before the onslaught of sugar and slavery.

Although Johnson intentionally focuses her study on the white population and on the social implications of the military reforms, she provides enough evidence to convince the reader that after 1763 much of Cuba's economic growth came from Spain's investment in construction and defense on the island. But other resources and endeavors contributed to the diversity of the economy—cattle, hardwoods, coffee, tobacco, apiculture, wax production, small-scale agriculture. When such economic reformers as Francisco de Arango y Parreño and Las Casas sought to convert Cuba to a sugar colony, they met fierce resistance not just from tobacco farmers (who enjoyed the Crown's favor), but also from large segments of the population who defended the merits of economic diversity and resisted monoculture. Leaders who eventually succeeded in shifting Cuba's economy to one dominated by sugar and slavery, did so against the wishes of most Cubans.

Apart from its economic ramifications, Cuba's militarization also had implications for ethnic relations on the island. Blacks who signed on to the military fared better in Cuba than anywhere else in Spain's overseas empire. That two-thirds of Cuba's free black population joined the mili-

tary is a testament both to the privileges and increased capacity to own property that military employment promised. In some exceptional cases, slaves earned their freedom and then purchased others to work for them. One former slave who was a veteran enjoyed full military privileges and accumulated enough wealth to own two slaves. Johnson builds a strong case to support her argument that in addition to ethnicity, class, and status (freed or enslaved), whether or not one was connected to the military also determined one's social position. However, her assertion that the military bridged the racial divide in the colony is less convincing, especially since the militias were segregated, and *limpieza de sangre* (purity of blood) remained a crucial aspect in establishing *peninsular* and Creole identity and thus their privileged status. One father opposed his daughter's "vile" fiancé in part because the suitor's family "was mixed with Indian blood" (p. 108). Elite perceptions of black and mulatto women as temptresses also point to ethnic animosity. In fact, these women were deemed such a threat that a law was passed to force them to cover their chests in public. Although that legislation had as much to do with gender relations as ethnic relations, it belies racial tolerance. On the other hand, in addition to contributing to peninsular acceptance of and attraction to Creole women, the disproportionate male to female white population on the island facilitated liaisons between *blancos* and women of color—both free and enslaved. (Conveniently, according to the data in appendix A, free colored and free black women in Havana outnumbered their male counterparts.) Naturally, the offspring of these associations increased the population of color, yet Johnson fails to explore the impact these mulattos had on Cuban society or how these relations may have contributed to reducing racial divisions. Her emphasis is on the white population and since people of color comprised less than fifteen percent of the free population, the growing number of *peninsulares* and their alliances with Creoles were the most significant determinant of social change on the island. Perhaps for this reason, black voices are rarely heard in her monograph.

In general, considering their infrequency in her sources, Johnson's treatment of women is laudatory. Since the military had been socially constructed as a man's domain, by its very nature, militarization subordinated women, but at times it also enabled them to improve their lot. One group of widows' successful fight for their pensions eventually contributed to the economic well being of all military widows, orphans, and mothers. Many of these same women later successfully deflected Las Casas' efforts to repeal their benefits. When emergencies demanded the men's attention, women acted as "deputy husbands" assuming control of the family's internal affairs, including financial matters. Yet even though a woman could arrange her son's education, daughter's marriage and dowry, and the sale of family property, the effect of women's empowerment reinforced, rather than disrupted patriarchal relations. Men recognized them as being equal to these tasks, but Johnson is careful not to overstate women's status or power. However, at times, she

seems to underestimate their nous. Johnson's description of a few Havana women's activities demonstrating "financial acumen unique for their time" (p. 119) belies her own findings (particularly the example of the proprietress of a boardinghouse and slaves in chapter two), which indicate that women with financial acumen were anything but unique. Nevertheless, Johnson's efforts to mine archival sources for evidence of women's realities provide a small window into their complex mix of empowerment and alienation in late eighteenth-century Cuba.

The transparent manner in which Johnson weaves her methodology and primary source material into the narrative is refreshing because it affords the reader a better position from which to critique her work, understand how she came to draw her conclusions and develop her analysis, and engage in the historian's craft. In the process she evinces the merits of microhistory as a way of both informing and correcting macro data. But at times extensive details bog down her narrative. Some parts are so packed with vignettes—the beginning of chapter five, for example, reads like a who's who in the José de Gálvez family and entourage—that the reader loses the larger argument. Because the plethora of information about myriad characters can be

dizzying, at times what emerges reads like a history of the great white men of late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Cuba—Bartolomé de Morales, Alejandro O'Reilly, Las Casas, Arango y Parreño, Joaquín Beltrán de Santa Cruz, Francisco de Montalvo, Varela—despite efforts to weave a story of lesser known actors. The effect contradicts the true value of this work. Nevertheless, by employing the methodology of microhistory, Johnson reconstructs the diverse and complex lives of everyday colonial Cubans and in redressing the dominance of elite perspectives she also enriches our understanding of Cuba's colonial past by releasing it from the grasp of sugar and slavery. In so doing, she establishes an agenda that encourages scholars and students to eschew a tendency to privilege macro data and hegemonic forces, in favor of an approach that also examines grassroots perspectives and experiences. At the same time, she is careful to show how events in Spain and Spain's failed military pursuits in Algeria, for example, affected Cuba, so as not to present local conditions and realities in a vacuum. Johnson's fine book demonstrates how exploring the dialectic relationship between structure and experience can yield acute understandings of the past in Cuba, Latin America, and the developing world.

