

Sugar, Migration, and Oral History in Twentieth-Century Cuba

By Carlos Velásquez Carrillo

On Monday, October 22nd, 2007, Professor Gillian McGillivray from York University's Glendon College History Department, and José Abreu, a visiting speaker from Cuba's National Union of Writers and Artists, presented the talk "Sugar, Migration, and Oral History in Twentieth-Century Cuba", that sought to shed light on the historical evolution of Cuba's sugar industry and the various factors that have conditioned its continuous transformation. The presentation, co-sponsored by CERLAC and York's History Department, dealt with three main areas of analysis: first, the patterns of migration that took place in order to provide the labour supply for the sugar industry, along with its racial and socioeconomic underpinnings; second, the mobilization of domestic sugar interests to gain ground in relation to their multinational counterparts; and finally, the process of state formation in Cuba in the first half of the 20th century, which was influenced mainly by the demands of the national sugar industry.

The presentation began with José Abreu's piece entitled "Canary Islanders and Caribbean Immigrants in Cuba's Sugar Industry, 1900-1925." From the vantage point of the workers and owners, Abreu outlined the ways in which the sugar industry's "labour supply problem," largely for foreign multinationals, was solved at the beginning of the 20th century. As the sugar industry

moved eastward in the aftermath of the Spanish-American War (1898) and Cuba's independence (1902), multinational corporations, such as the United Fruit Company and Chaparra Sugar Company, moved to "import" labour to the sparsely populated Camaguey and Oriente provinces by welcoming Spanish and Caribbean workers and their families. The initial preference was to bring migrants from Spain's Canary Islands, but this option turned out to be "unsustainable" as most *Canario* workers left the sugar plantations after one or two harvests to resettle in the urban centers, mainly because many of them had family networks already established in Havana or Santiago de Cuba. Thus, the problem of labor shortage had only been solved on a short-term basis.

As an alternate solution, and the one that would prove to be the more successful, multinationals began to bring workers from Haiti and Jamaica. From the point of view of the owners, these workers were more "reliable" because they stayed at the sugar plantation for long periods of time. This happened for several reasons: first, because their lack of Spanish bound them to the plantation's surroundings; second, because their governments provided no protection, making the workers dependent on the plantation's socioeconomic dynamics; and third, because the temporary allocation of land and some other resources during the non-harvest period

(*tiempo muerto*) made it more attractive for these workers to remain on the plantation grounds rather than face economic uncertainty somewhere else on the island. It is important to note that with the advent of Haitian and English Antillean migration to Cuba's central and eastern provinces, the "white-only" racist immigration policy upheld by the Cuban government at the time was changed by the labour demands of these multinationals, demonstrating the significant political influence and economic power that the Cuban sugar industry possessed at the time.

Professor McGillivray presented on some of the elements of her forthcoming book, *Blazing Cane: Sugar Communities, Class, and State-Formation in Cuba, 1868-1959*, in a talk entitled "From Patronage to Populism, 1900-1925." Essentially, her historical account revolves around the idea of looking at the sugar industry from the perspective of the "local level," as opposed to the more conventional and broader scope of US foreign policy-based explanations. By "local level" Professor McGillivray refers to the actions and mobilization campaigns undertaken by both Cuban sugar cane farmers and, later on, sugar cane farmers, and sugar workers in the first half of the 20th century, especially during the Machado years (1925-1933), in order to improve their position vis-à-vis foreign sugar multinationals.

The Cuban sugar cane farmers, who had to sell their cane to the more powerful foreign multinationals, raised a voice of nationalism to vindicate their rightful position within the national sugar industry, and even claimed to speak on behalf of the increasingly impoverished sugar cane workers. A turning point in this mobilization process came in 1925 with the presidential candidacy of Gerardo Machado, who was open to addressing the demands of the sugar cane farmers. Machado, a former general in Cuba's War of Independence and later a politician with populist tendencies, won the 1925 election in a landslide and set out to implement several policies that benefited the domestic sugar growers, mainly in terms of credit availability and an increase in the accessibility of resources needed for the commercialization of sugar. The Machado government began to promote measures that helped the sugar cane farmers in the 1920s, a trend that continued throughout the 1930s even after the Machado government had been removed from power. The regime also intervened between capitalists and sugar workers upon Machado's election as president.

By 1932-33, the Machado administration had moved away from its initial populist stand and had increasingly become a repressive dictatorial regime. In this sense, the domestic sugar cane workers' voices hit a roadblock for some time, as foreign multinationals were able to regain the upper hand in subsequent governments (following Machado's overthrow in a popular uprising in 1933). One of the most important results of the domestic small-scale sugar cane mobilization processes was the emergence of domestically run sugar plantations as increasingly consolidated communities that were

capable of bringing forth a platform that sought to enhance their multifaceted interests (mainly in terms of class and position as both the sugar farmers and the sugar workers were able to advance some of their demands). It can be argued, then, that some sugar plantations achieved a level of community and political cohesiveness that allowed them to influence, at least partially, the state's sugar policy and thus shape its economic orientation.

In essence, the fundamental issue raised by Professor McGillivray's talk is the process of state formation in Cuba and its inescapable link to the development of the national sugar industry. After independence, state formation in Cuba, which at first provided significant concessions to multinationals and then adopted a more domestically grounded policy direction, was shaped by the increasingly multidimensional demands of the sugar industry. But it was not until the 1930s that the Cuban state began to assert itself against foreign capital and big national capitalists in favor of small-scale sugar cane farmers, and to a lesser extent, of sugar cane workers. It is within the framework of this increasing responsiveness of the Cuban state to the demands of the sugar industry that the latter's subsequent functioning patterns and policy roadmaps would develop, both in theory and practice, at least in the period between the post-Machado transition and the 1959 revolution.



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Contact CERLAC

Email: cerlac@yorku.ca

Web: <http://www.yorku.ca/cerlac/>