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The Social Transformation of Eighteenth-Century Cuba
(review)

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Sherry Johnson. *The Social Transformation of Eighteenth-Century Cuba.* Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2001. 267 pp.

Sherry Johnson's new book, based on careful archival research in Cuba, Spain, and the United States, seeks to displace the centrality of sugar from our understanding of Cuban social transformations and political loyalties in the later eighteenth century. She sees the rise of sugar as a contingent and contested process, one that ultimately superseded an earlier vision of colonial society based on a diverse agricultural and commercial economy and active Creole participation in the military and administration.

The starting point of her account is the Spanish Crown's response to the fall of Havana in 1762 to the British. When Spain regained control in 1763, it inaugurated important changes in its imperial defense system with Havana, and its people occupied a central role in the process. In Johnson's view, the development of Havana as a strategic military site had important implications for local society. Cubans of different classes and colors were co-opted by the Spanish military; the *fuero militar* was extremely attractive to many Cubans, as it allowed them special economic prerogatives. Moreover, the influx of Spanish military officials produced increased intermarriage between elite *creoles* and *peninsulares*. Thus, through the military buildup, the Spanish Crown was able to win the loyalty of different strata of colonial society. While Cubans used the military as a source of social mobility and prestige, they also fought valiantly for the Crown in numerous military engagements in the Caribbean.

However, the new pact between colony and metropolis, sealed by arms and by marriage, proved to be short-lived. The fate of the colonial militias was always dependent on the shifting nature of Court politics and changes in ministerial personnel, factors that Johnson reconstructs with great skill. After the death of Charles III and the passing of the Gálvez clan from prominence in the governance of the colonies, Spanish policy was less sensitive to the interests of colonial subjects. The villain of Johnson's account is Luis de las Casas, Captain General of Cuba from 1790 to 1796. Las Casas's abuses were many: he sought to change the *fuero militar*, thus shaking the foundation of Creole loyalty to the crown, and to impress free laborers for public works projects. Moreover, he favored those Creole and peninsular merchants and planters, such as Francisco Arango y Parreño, who advocated Cuba's whole-hearted embrace of slavery and the slave trade. By the end of his tenure, he had alienated practically every segment of colonial society and had set the stage for slavery and sugar's take-off. The sense of "*Cubanidad*" expressed by "*el pueblo cubano*" in the independence wars of the later nineteenth century thus had its roots deep in the eighteenth century when the metropolis made and then broke a new contract with the colony.

Social Transformation is an important work and deserves to be read widely.

In particular, it moves convincingly from Court politics in Spain to social unrest in the streets of Havana. It thus joins a growing body of work — by scholars such as Manuel Moreno Fraginals, Allan Kuethe, Josep M. Fradera, and Joan Casanovas — that has reconsidered the tensions and points of adhesion between Spain and Cuba from the late eighteenth century to the late nineteenth. This reader was therefore surprised by Johnson's characterization of Cuban historiography as "held hostage to studies of sugar, slavery, colonialism, and dependence" (1). That description does not do justice to a rich and diverse historiographic tradition, one to which Johnson has made a welcome addition.

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Efrén Córdova. *El trabajo forzado en Cuba: Un recorrido amargo de la historia*. Miami: Ediciones Universal, 2001. 262 pp.

In this book a prominent scholar of Cuban labor history, Efrén Córdova, examines four periods of Cuban history by looking at the marginalized elements in society (workers) to find the continuity of five hundred years of Cuban history. For Córdova, that continuity is the history of forced labor. Ultimately, the author suggests that workers in post-1959 Cuba are the inheritors of this history. In fact, concludes Córdova, today's workers are more coerced than at any time in Cuban history, including the nearly three hundred years of African slavery.

Córdova examines the history of the *encomienda*, African slavery, coerced labor of Chinese and other migrants during the nineteenth century, and the Cuban Revolution. These labor systems represent forms of institutional and structural violence levied upon workers. Using a judicious selection of both primary and secondary sources, and building from his own two-volume history of Cuban labor, Córdova provides useful overviews of all four periods. For instance, in Part I he addresses the origins of the *encomienda* system, how indigenous workers were employed, the debates and laws attempting to curtail the *encomienda*, and the problems with enforcing those laws. In Part II, the largest section with five chapters, Córdova succinctly examines why slavery arrived and grew in Cuba, the different uses of slavery, and the dilemmas arising from the gradual abolition of slavery in the late 1800s. But in this section Córdova begins to let his political views show. He challenges Marxist historians who examine slavery and its downfall from a purely materialist point of view and who toe the Communist party line that slavery really did not end until 1959 (168). Part III is the pleasant surprise of the book, as Córdova examines various forms of coerced migrant labor, including that of the Irish,