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State of Ambiguity

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Published by Duke University Press

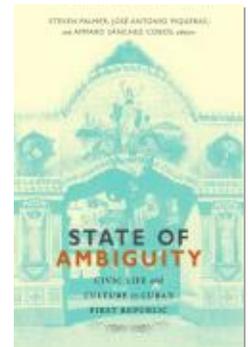
Palmer, Steven.

State of Ambiguity: Civic Life and Culture in Cuba's First Republic.

Duke University Press, 2014.

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CHAPTER 8



District 25

Rotary Clubs and Regional Civic Power in Cuba, 1916–1940

Maikel Fariñas Borrego

Most studies of sociability in Cuba have focused on migratory processes and the transformation into *lo cubano* of various modes of associating, primarily those rooted in Spanish, Chinese, and African traditions. Generally, they converge along an axis of common themes that tackle various specific models of association, including mutualism, religious brotherhoods, unions, and trade organizations, and with a thematic emphasis on the popular sectors, charity, musical groups, and the development of the sciences.¹ Strategies and forms of sociability inherited from contact with U.S. and British cultures have received very little attention, though they had notable influence in the country's political and economic spheres, especially those that sprang up in Cuba after the founding of the republic in 1902.² In an effort to address this imbalance, the following chapter provides an overview of the appearance and operations of Rotary clubs in Cuba in order to discern the multiplicity of positions taken by the “regional bourgeoisie.” I try to get away from a historiographical trend that understands the bourgeoisie as a unified and homogeneous group and, in the most extreme cases, identifies their interests with that of powerful groups in Havana.

Studying Rotary clubs makes it possible to demonstrate how various associations, acting at a local level, held a particular sway that was of major importance for regional life in Cuba. The work of these associations went far beyond the mere social and organizational into the very political, economic, and symbolic universes of the locales in which they were established. Intriguingly, analysis of organizations like Rotary provide evidence of occasions when regional groups fo-

cused their power within civil society in order to modify laws or policies imposed by the central state or to launch, from their remote position, alternative destinies for the nation as a whole. Rotary clubs, in short, offer a nice way to de-center Cuban history and study regional power and civil society, but their character as part of a national and international network helps to avoid falling into the insularism that often limits the scope of local history.

Social groups that act upon and influence public opinion are usually identified as interest groups. Whether they are ephemeral forms of social coalition or well-structured organizations, a study of their actions allows for the identification of an important dimension of the social history of politics. Our study sets out to analyze forms of civic power in a republic that was extremely centralized in an effort to arrive at a far more pluralized vision of the acting interests and struggles within the country. At the same time, these regional civic actions also transcended national boundaries. In the very same way that power and counter-power, action and resistance, contestation and negotiation intersect within national politics, these dynamics are also in play at the international level—in this case in the relations between Cuba and the United States. In studying Rotary, we will also be able to appreciate the process by which certain strategies of domination employed by the United States were subverted with the same tools conceived for the purpose of this subjugation.

The Arrival and Diffusion of *Rotarismo* in Cuba

Even if abundant manifestations of sociability already existed in Cuba, the law of associations (instituted by royal decree on June 13, 1888) considerably expanded the creation and growth of new societies. A great majority of these associations were inherited from a Spanish cultural tradition that fostered cultural centers like secondary schools and intellectual societies (*ateneos*), social clubs (*casinos*), regional centers, and mutualist and charitable organizations. However, the increasing cultural proximity of the United States began to provoke the creation of other types of associations within Cuba. Very little is known about the gradual predominance of certain organizational forms such as the club, a phenomenon that began to appear at the end of the nineteenth century and accelerated at the beginning of the twentieth century, most notably in the activities and level of social interaction of elites in the capital organized by such entities as the Unión Club de La Habana (1880), the Habana Yacht Club (1886), the American Club (1901), the Vedado Tennis Club (1902), the Young Men's Christian Association (1905), the Club Atlético de Cuba (1909), the Círculo Militar y Naval (1911), the Country Club

de la Habana (1912), the Lawn Tennis Club (1913), the Club Rotario de La Habana (1916), the Club Atenas (1917), the Miramar Yacht Club (1926), the Club de Leones de La Habana (1927), the Havana Biltmore Yacht & Country Club (1927), and the Lyceum (1928). To this we can certainly add forms of informal sociability also adopted from the United States, such as the bridge party or baby shower, which were all the rage among the elite of this period.³ Over the years, the modes and manners of the elite in Cuba increasingly seduced important sectors of the middle class; they were even appropriated and reinterpreted by popular culture and transformed in a variety of ways.⁴ Research on these forms of associations is scarce, with the exception of freemasonry, the only form of sociability originating from Britain or the United States that has captured the interest of a significant number of researchers.⁵

The rapid spread of Rotary clubs throughout the world after the foundation of the first club in February 1905 under the guiding principles of Paul Harris has been practically ignored by historians. By 1910 fourteen clubs had been founded in the United States, and the celebration of the first Rotary convention took place in Chicago in August of that same year, resulting in the creation of the National Association of Rotary Clubs, headed by Harris. The following year, at the Portland convention, the characteristic slogan, “He profits most who serves best,” was adopted and preparations were made for the publication of the monthly *Rotarian*.⁶ By this time, the first club outside the United States had already been founded in the Canadian city of Winnipeg. In subsequent years, the movement toward establishing associations expanded and increasingly claimed considerable international force; within ten years, organizations had been established throughout Europe, Latin America, Asia, Africa, and Oceania.⁷

Rotary clubs assumed different characteristics in each country, and although they established specific organizational objectives meant to cater to the club’s development in each nation, they nonetheless outlined their proposals as an international entity. With the appearance of the first clubs outside the United States, it became necessary by 1912 to restructure the National Association of Rotary Clubs, and in 1912 the International Association of Rotary Clubs was created.⁸ In 1922, at a convention in Los Angeles, the statute was revised and the denomination Rotary International (RI) was adopted, a name that still identifies the organization today.⁹

Generally, Rotary clubs were established in the capital or principal city of a province or region and spread. In Rotarians’ incursions into other cities, whether it was within the same country or in other new territories, the same commercial networks already developed by businessmen were used. These

businessmen became commissioners for the organization. Needless to say, the different organizational dynamics and the idiosyncrasies of each country resulted in considerable differences among associations established internationally, even if they were governed by the same institutional norms. In fact, the Rotarian Juan Marinello, speaking on the issue of transferring cultural expression from one nation to another, remarked:

Every institution, fellow Rotarians, although having by their very nature a universal character, adapt themselves to the demands of each country, and each one comes to adopt its own features. This is certainly not a new argument. It is simply a fact that a Catholic priest from the U.S. has much more in common with a Protestant priest from the same country than with a Catholic priest from Spain. This being a universal law, Rotary clubs have been no exception to it and, furthermore, no one can deny that Rotary clubs in the Republic [of Cuba] work with a certain originality. If compared to other countries, our clubs have dedicated themselves with a special focus to political action with a heightened nationalist consciousness. This state—sad as it is to say, though a great deal sadder to keep it quiet through cowardice—has provoked our disorderly public administration. Our wine—as Martí would say—may be sour, but it is our wine. It is necessary that our Clubs persist with this sublime attitude, which is the most beneficial and necessary thing for us.¹⁰

The statement reveals the process of adaptation to new cultural elements, as well as an awareness of the protagonists of this process. At the same time, it unveils without hesitation a preferred arena of work for Rotary clubs in Cuba: intervention in national politics.

Rotarians first arrived in Cuba from the Rotary Club of Tampa, Florida, which sought to establish the first association of its kind in a non-English-speaking country. The initial efforts to organize the Rotary Club in Havana began in 1914 under Ernest Berger, a member of the Florida club. Following his first visit to the country, the businessman returned in 1916 with his associates Ángel Cuesta and John Turner. On April 26, 1916, Berger, Cuesta, and Turner succeeded in establishing a Rotary chapter in Cuba, making it the fifth country worldwide to have hosted Rotary.¹¹ Although concrete information is lacking, we can assume that commissioners were sent to Santiago de Cuba and Matanzas and, as a consequence, in the summer of 1918 clubs were founded in both these cities. From these three founding points, clubs spread the length and breadth of Cuba.

This proliferation across the nation permitted the structuring of a solid

Table 8.1
Founding of Rotary Clubs in Cuban Cities, by Year

YEAR	CITY
1916	Havana
1918	Santiago de Cuba, Matanzas
1919	Guantánamo, Sagua la Grande, Cienfuegos
1921	Sancti Spíritus, Trinidad, Camagüey, Caibarién
1923	Santa Clara
1924	Cárdenas
1925	Morón, Ciego de Ávila, Colón, Güines, Manzanillo, and Pinar del Río
1927	Holguín
1928	Santa Cruz del Sur
1931	Bayamo
1934	San Antonio de los Baños, Antilla, and Florida
1935	Placetas, Nuevitas, Victoria de las Tunas, Artemisa, Palma Soriano, Puerto Padre, Jovellanos, Banes, and Yaguajay
1936	Mayarí, Pina, Gibara, Marianao, and Santiago de las Vegas
1937	Jiguaní
1938	Regla y Guanabacoa

Source: René Acevedo Laborde, *Manual Rotario*, Rotary International, *Conferencia del Distrito 25 . . .*, Rotary International. *District 25: Memoria del año oficial . . .*, 39.

network that allowed for the development of each club's proposals with greater facility. By 1939–40, for example, there were bases in each of the country's six provinces: twelve clubs in Oriente, seven in Camagüey, seven in Las Villas, four in Matanzas, seven in Havana, and two in Pinar del Río. To date, it has been impossible to identify a pattern for the establishment of clubs throughout the country beyond a logical administrative-political hierarchy. What remains clear is that clubs spread from the capital to the respective hub of each province and, from there, to each of the municipalities.

Characterizing the Members

It is well known that Rotary developed a system of classification for its members that became increasingly detailed. As a rule, members had to be established in business or in an independent profession. Departing from this latter condition, an influential individual could be nominated as a member

if supported by two already existing members. It was necessary to determine the business that best represented the community in order to attempt to enlist the owner or representative of the company into the local club.¹² Among aspiring Rotarians in a city, the most prominent individuals were always preferred, though the lists of members include a great many individuals who had very low social profiles.¹³ Nevertheless, membership included some very well-known actors in Cuban history: Eduardo Justo Chibás Guerra (civil engineer, father of Eddie Chibás, one of the presidents of the Partido del Pueblo Cubano, Orthodox); Juan Marinello Vidaurreta (a leading writer who became president of the Partido Socialista Popular and would occupy important political posts after 1959); Gerardo Machado y Morales (leader of the Partido Liberal, elected as president of the republic in 1925), Carlos de la Torre y de la Huerta (distinguished researcher and university professor in natural sciences and zoology), Conrado W. Massaguer (recognized caricature artist and director of the journal *Social*), Aquilino Entrialgo Bolado (owner of the most important department store in the country), Andrés A. Terry Gutiérrez, Julio Blanco Herrera Clavería, and Juan Sabatés Pérez (three important capitalists and industrialists), and Enrique Godoy Sayán and Juan Gelats Botet (two prominent personalities in the world of finance).¹⁴

To examine the social character of Rotary clubs in various Cuban cities, I will examine three—those of Pinar del Río, Camagüey, and Havana. At the founding meeting of the Rotary Club of Pinar del Río in 1925, a classification system that determined its initial composition of twenty-one members was immediately established.¹⁵ The following professional categories were approved for the members of this new club: lighting merchant, hotel owner, farmer, agronomist, financier, proprietor, professor, civil engineer, banker, tobacco harvester, bacteriologist, farmer, accountant, surgeon, theater producer, journalist, lawyer, general practitioner, dental surgeon, attorney, and private school teacher.¹⁶ Nine professionals appear on this list, including four physicians. To these were added three financiers and three agriculturalists, only one of them explicitly identified with tobacco, the province's most important crop. There are three individuals that appear on the list dedicated to the provision of services: a hotel manager, a theater producer, and a lighting merchant. We also only see one proprietor, without further clarification on his position. Finally, the list includes an attorney and a representative for private schools who is revealed to be a clergyman.

The Rotary Club of Camagüey numbered fifty-one members in 1939 and only had three men representing the ranching and agricultural sector (a rancher, a sugar farmer, and a coffee roaster). Financiers were a little better

represented (there were four), two of them specializing in insurance. A dozen professionals were included in the ranks of this club, and half of them were either physicians or involved in the medical sciences. The largest subgroup, numbering fifteen people, was composed of medium-sized and small manufacturers, most of them focused on food production. Businessmen formed the third largest subgroup with eight representatives; five of these members provided the community with services including light and power, railways, streetcars, and activities associated with hotels and bars.¹⁷

The Rotary Club of Havana was the largest in the country, with 156 members in 1940.¹⁸ The importance of sugar production, and its extensive cultivation in the country, is such that scholars have distinguished it from the rest of Cuba's agricultural production when speaking of the nation's economy. Nonetheless, the number of capitalists associated with this sector in Havana's Rotarian circle was small—only three members declared themselves involved with sugar (one grower, the owner of a mill, and a wholesaler). What is more surprising is that, in a country for the most part dedicated to stock-raising and agricultural production, the lists do not include other agricultural producers of coffee, tobacco, or food destined for the internal market. Not even ranchers received representation in the capital city's club. Nevertheless, we can identify certain individuals involved in industries that are ultimately linked to agriculture or ranching: coffee roasting factories, tobacco factories, rice mills, tobacco plant warehouses, and commercial refrigeration.

On the other hand, twelve Havana Rotarians were from the world of finance (banking and insurance). Importers represented another significant group, as eleven members were classified as such. Professionals from a variety of disciplines had a large representation, numbering thirty-one—with ten doctors and nine lawyers. Small and medium-sized industrialists numbered thirty, and a significant number of these men were involved in manufacturing foods like vegetable oils, condensed milk, ice, beer, yeast, mineral water, soup, ice cream, rum, and soda. Those to follow in importance were members who were involved in the paper industry and whose areas of concentration were mostly in packaging—paper plates, carton containers, envelopes, and paper cups—and textiles such as fabric, stockings, shirts, and towels. Next was a group of individuals engaged in chemical, pharmaceutical, and cosmetic production—cement, perfume, and painkillers—as well as the remaining manufacturers who were involved in various lines of production including tobacco, cigars, furniture, mattresses, and wooden boxes. Finally, we must include in this subgroup those who were involved in public works, roads, and shipyards. Twenty-eight individuals worked in the service

sector: eleven worked in transportation and seven worked in communications. Individuals working in the commercial sector also represented a significant portion of the membership, numbering twenty-six.¹⁹ In general, the members were “white” Cuban men; aside from the fact that Afro-Cubans and mestizos had their own organizations, they were usually not permitted to join organizations formed by white Cubans. The presence of English and German surnames on the membership lists of these clubs is also noteworthy.

Interest Groups: Regional, National, and International

The influence that a Rotary club could exercise in a small town was at times disproportionate to its size. The power of these associations, constantly transformed into local interest groups, grew largely as a result of their advantageous recourse to strong national and international networks. In fact, this provided them with a distinct technical superiority that allowed them to trump other social and political actors in the region. There were other factors that facilitated this process. The sociopolitical standing of club members was of great importance; positions of power and leadership within the local community were qualities that the organization most desired to find in its members. Also crucial was the ability of members to publish directly in journals and magazines or maintain connections with local or national publications that would permit a degree of influence over the community. Public opinion could be shaped through these interventions, aimed at prioritizing solutions to the most predominant conflicts within these small communities. Moreover, Rotary clubs increasingly developed a degree of organization that facilitated their function as an interest group. Although Rotary clubs never saw themselves as interest groups per se, the evidence indicates they functioned in this mode. From a series of simple public interventions we can observe mechanisms and dynamics that reveal the intrinsic characteristics of their procedural methods at all levels: from the local to the municipal, provincial, national, and finally international.

The number of motions initiated by each club in their monthly sessions could be considerable, and some of these activities included lobbying or cooperative projects with public entities that suited their interests. However, a significant amount of time was also devoted to notifications, warnings, follow-ups on issues developed in previous weeks, fund-raising, rulings, motions in support of other associations, and multiple solicitations to governmental authorities. For instance, the projects developed by both the Rotary Club of Sagua la Grande in May 1923 and that of Pinar del Río in August 1928 serve as examples of some of these preoccupations. The former organized

a theatrical function to collect funds in order to buy a vehicle for the local health department, acquire street lamps, and initiate a project for a children's park.²⁰ The latter made several appeals that are worth listing in order to distinguish the managerial character of its proceedings: reiterating to the mayor an appeal for the betterment of parks and streets; requesting that the reserve of funds be administered to pay the costs for the construction of a fire station and the acquisition of equipment; soliciting the secretary of public works to send a chemical fire extinguisher and to repair a major road; requesting that the Ministry of Health clean the parks and avenues; expressing interest in the establishment of a central bank; and supporting the Rotary Club of Camagüey in favor of preserving and advancing cattle ranching in Cuba.²¹

Significantly, Rotarians participated in the decision-making process for mapping out the route of Cuba's great central highway, one of the most important projects of the Machado era. The proposal for the design was launched during one of the meetings held by District 25, which, in accordance with the international regulations created by RI for Cuba at the time, corresponded to the whole of Cuba.²² These clubs made great efforts to contribute, in a coordinated fashion, to the creation of what would be the principal roads in the country. For example, during the third meeting of the district, "[Mario] Macbeath suggested that each municipality and each provincial council should study the stretch of road that corresponded to their respective locale in order to coordinate their own findings with the government's overall plans for the principal highway."²³ Moreover, they understood the necessity of defining the best way in which to accomplish their goals and of identifying which doors needed to be knocked on in order to achieve them. The suggestion to continue in this direction was taken up immediately: "García Vida proposes that . . . these studies, once completed, should be submitted [for discussion] to their respective clubs and subject [thereafter to further discussion] among the Senators and Representatives of each province in similar club sessions so that the project becomes of interest to the nation."²⁴ The plan was essentially to have legislators who represented the community in congress participating in club meetings; this was to guarantee the success of club tenders, producing roads that would be as amenable as possible to the vision and particular interests of Rotarians. For example, the Rotary Club of Matanzas executed their studies with this objective in mind and invited the engineer from the province's Department of Public Works and other members of the provincial government to sessions, in order to understand what was needed to finish incomplete stretches of highway from Unión to Bolondrón, Cidra to Sabanilla, and Güira to Navajas.²⁵

On several occasions, Rotarians from the interior provinces assumed extremely critical stances against public authorities or called in certain connections within their powerful networks to force changes in whatever they believed needed to be modified. For instance, agreements and treaties conducted with foreign powers that would affect the interests of Cuban ranchers greatly alarmed Rotarians from Jiguaní. There were most certainly members in this club whose investments were tied to businesses that were adversely affected by these agreements. In a meeting that took place in 1937, Rotarians declared, "Taking into consideration the importance of the ranching industry in our country, the Rotary Club of Juguaní unanimously opposes the trade agreement with Uruguay by reason that this stated agreement is greatly detrimental to what we consider to be our second largest national industry."²⁶ Members of this club undertook immediate and multilevel actions to reverse the situation. First, they made the negative implications of this agreement for the country known to the highest national authorities by drafting telegrams that they agreed to send to the presidents of the republic, the chamber of representatives, the senate, and secretaries of agriculture and state.²⁷ Second, the club notified Rotarians around the province and throughout the nation so as to coordinate collective action, particularly a "campaign that opposes the aforementioned trade agreement" involving the filing of complaints with public support to increase pressure on state administration by "sending a copy of the same telegram, in order to obtain from provincial and national clubs the aid and cooperation necessary to fight against the government."²⁸

In contrast to Rotarians from the eastern provinces, who were actively involved in preventing unfavorable international agreements, their counterparts in the west of the country were fighting for a commercial agreement with Spain that would benefit the export of tobacco. To accomplish this, members of the Rotary Club of Pinar del Río produced a memorandum in collaboration with the local house of commerce that explained the necessity and validity of this project. Shortly afterward, the presidential secretary received a letter that outlined the interests of the project and was accompanied by the aforementioned document. The old colonial metropolis was depicted in this study as an excellent market for the exporting of both manufactured and raw tobacco.²⁹

Since the rate of consumption within the nation is very small compared to the [agricultural] production and the production of the tobacco and cigar-making industry within the nation, [factories within the country] do not have the capacity to process all the tobacco [generated in the country-

side of Pinar del Río], it is necessary and indispensable to find [foreign] markets for the surplus produced in tobacco leaves and raw material. At the same time, in order that the tobacco and cigar-making industries are able to augment their productive capacities, it is equally necessary that markets be found [to encourage] this meager production.³⁰

The idea of coordinating a trade agreement with Spain had been in process since the 1910s. Rotarians in this region, who were experts in the matter, promoted the achievement of the blocked agreement. It is worth noting that their particular interest in exporting the tobacco plant was itself a direct outcome of the club's commitment to defending the fundamental interests of the agricultural producers in the region. "The Rotary Club of Pinar del Río, always attentive to the nation's problems, [are] even more interested in local matters and especially in those that are related to the province's principal source of wealth . . . tobacco."³¹ However, the most important factor in this case is the persistent and systematic character of the efforts this club made to obtain approval for the agreement. In fact, members never ceased inquiring into the state of affairs concerning the agreement. It must be noted that their fundamental interest in this project was the development of the province and not necessarily the country.³² Under the banner of acting in the best interest of the *patria chica*—the area defined by deeply felt regional loyalties—the club exerted constant pressure on the national government.

A brief chronology of the events that led to the success of their venture allows us to appreciate the level of work deployed to achieve their objectives. The first steps were taken in December 1925 with a call for support in the city's chamber of commerce to negotiate the realization of this project.³³ In May 1926, they agreed to "review the petitions that must be made to Spain as part of the trade agreement . . . in relation to the interests of Pinar del Río." In July the club met with the minister responsible for the agreement after reviewing the matter with the Comisión Revisora de Aranceles (a customs and excise commission) and after having contacted a number of industry groups like the Asociación de Almacenistas y Cosecheros (tobacco harvest and storage), the Unión de Fabricantes de Tabacos y Cigarros (cigar and cigarette makers), the trade journal *El Tabaco*, and the Federación de Sociedades Económicas (a federation of pro-industry associations). Significant headway was made during this meeting, and "the secretary of state accepted a proposal that was included in the agreement, which obligated Spain to buy a fixed amount of raw tobacco annually." The suggestion to "request the support of local associations and the provincial governor in campaign-

ing for the trade agreement” followed immediately afterward.³⁴ The club announced that they were looking for the support of all civic entities as well as that of the central authorities in charge of regional administration. In March 1927, the club asked the secretary of state “for information as to the state of negotiations concerning the trade agreement with Spain.”³⁵ Later, knowing that there would be a visit from the president of the republic to the capital of the province, club members decided to deliver “a report on the status of tobacco in the region and [the necessity] of the agreement.” Nothing deterred members from achieving this objective, and at every opportunity Rotarians were quick to turn to government officials at all levels to reaffirm these interests. The last memo related to this issue is from May 1927, when members decided to “organize a meeting for mayors of the province who support the negotiations aimed at coordinating a trade agreement.”³⁶ Thus the club not only sought to expand the interest group’s support base within civil society but it also sought the backing of all local government officials.

Another case demonstrates far more covert mechanisms employed to exercise political pressure. In late 1925 Julio Antonio Mella, a student leader who had recently become the first secretary general of the Cuban Communist Party, was arrested for allegedly having placed a bomb in the Payret Theater. In prison he staged a hunger strike, a strategic act of protest against the Machado regime’s authoritarian tactics to eliminate political threats that triggered a massive national solidarity movement. Though it is often remembered as a movement led by a union of progressive actors on the left, in fact Rotarians were centrally involved. Believing the government to be acting in error, Rotarians pulled strings in an effort to effect a reversal. Nine days after the initiation of the hunger strike, the Rotary Club of Camagüey sent a telegram addressed to the acting interior minister: “The Rotary Club of Camagüey respectfully requests of you, Sir, as a fellow Rotarian and Camagüeyano, to exert your valuable influence in obtaining the release of Julio Mella.”³⁷ It is interesting to note that the organization, at this moment transformed into an interest group, appealed first to the minister’s status as a Rotarian and only secondarily to his local origins when demanding that he carry out the petition of his fellow club members. Given the importance that Mella’s liberation had in calming public opinion within the country, the intervention is notable.

If the actions of Rotary clubs in the different provinces could take on such forms, what about those of the Rotary Club of Havana (RCH)? The protectionist leanings of Cuban Rotarians were well known in economic circles. In debates on protectionism and free trade, Rotarians identified themselves

with the former and asked for the implementation of tariffs that would serve these interests.³⁸ The socioeconomic standing of the club's membership necessarily conditioned the political and economic posture of the organization. Since small and medium-sized industrialists constituted an abundant group within the RCH membership, this resulted in the rest of the members declaring their support of protectionism. The club had manifested its strong support of this economic policy since 1922 and did so more ardently when the matter became a subject of debate in the House of Representatives in August 1922. According to one contemporary media chronicler of Cuban politics, "The matter was discussed in the House [of Representatives] . . . Ferrara advocated free trade, and Santiago Rey and Germán López defended protectionism. The Rotary Club [of Havana] continues to be the stronghold of protectionist ideals and in a session, attended by [Orestes] Ferrara, notions of free trade were vehemently fought by Crusellas, Blanco Herrera, Alzugaray, and Dufau."³⁹

The RCH was well acquainted with the economic and political stance of members of the House of Representatives. It was also eager to make its own criteria public and shape public opinion in accordance with the club's own interests. The RCH invited Ferrara to a session on September 7, 1922. Ferrara was then obligated to stand before those who were not only the principal champions of protectionism but also the owners and representatives of the most prominent small and medium-sized industries in the country. This seemed to be a debate that addressed the development of a more diversified economy, which defended sectors not involved in sugar production within the national economy. However, it is worth mentioning that this economic positioning of Rotarians resulted in their public recognition as the fundamental center of protectionist ideals to the extent that their voice was represented in public opinion as conflicting with the House of Representatives. More specifically, their public voice was seen as equaling the latter and capable of maintaining a direct and critical debate with these emblematic institutions of the state.

In the early 1920s, the Rotary Club of Havana maintained a critical stance toward the national government. In fact, the RCH was one of the organizations that, beginning in 1923, supported the Veterans and Patriots Movement (Movimiento de Veteranos y Patriotas) in their effort to reform a corrupt political system and raise the moral tone in public affairs.⁴⁰ The RCH affirmed that "only an honest public life and perfect honesty in administration will make us prosperous and, considering that the program of legislative reform presented to the Public Powers by the National Association of Veterans and

Patriots embodies in all its parts the aspiration of this Rotary Club, we wish to publicly manifest our sympathies with the moralizing principles of good government that this association sustains in its program.” The club also participated in the Cuban Council for National Renovation (Junta Cubana de Renovación Nacional), which exposed in detail all the wrongs that afflicted the country. This is a clear demonstration of the kind of critical thinking that animated Rotarians from Havana, at least during those years.⁴¹ However, in later years, there was considerable convergence between the interests of the Rotary Club of Havana and the presidential campaign of Gerardo Machado. The well-known slogan “Water, roads, and schools” anchored the presidential campaign of the Liberal Party candidate.⁴² His political program was in tune with some principal debates initiated by Rotarians over the previous months during the electoral race. It is noteworthy that Rotarians went from criticizing the government of Alfredo Zayas to helping establish the manifesto for a fellow Rotarian in his journey to becoming president of the country.

All incursions into public life by the RCH marked out positions in civil society by the urban middle class of the capital. Members could openly act as an interest group, initiate subtle changes in the tendencies and criteria of public opinion, or continually reaffirm their public position on matters of national importance. When Machado moved away from his early reformism and assumed dictatorial powers, the RCH moved with the urban middle-class tide as it shifted against the strongman. In 1934, a year after the fall of Machado, in a plenary session for the RCH that took place at the Hotel Nacional, members received notice of the abolition of the Platt Amendment. They expressed their collective delight at the news and sent a message to the president of the republic, congratulating him for putting an end to the appendix that used the nation’s sovereignty as collateral. The letter to the president stated: “The president [of the RCH] reminds his fellow colleagues of the pleasant and joyous news of the abolition of the Platt Amendment, which signifies our complete independence without any form of limitation. It was agreed on this occasion to send a congratulatory message to the Honorable president of the republic.”⁴³

In general, Rotarians focused on making the public aware of the importance of the club’s active participation in the socioeconomic processes under way in the country. They affirmed that “each populace has the government it deserves. Contribute in creating one that is worthy of your community.”⁴⁴ This meant joining their political party’s neighborhood committees and voting on election days.⁴⁵ However, in time, they succeeded in delivering their

social and political positions with greater boldness and even designed government programs for political figures who aspired to occupy the highest offices in the country. The contradictions within the organization were evident as Cuban Rotarians were, if only momentarily, more openly political than was expected of Rotarians in any country. One of the ex-governors of District 25, Carlos Gárate Brú, declared that “Rotary clubs do not discuss or challenge ideologies or forms of government.”⁴⁶ This contradicted the ways in which the Cuban organization proceeded, since Rotarians even came to explicitly formulate a plan of government that would have national reach. In preparation for the 1944 elections, the RCH wrote a memorandum to Ramón Grau San Martín and Raúl de Cárdenas Echarte, both candidates for the Partido Cubano Revolucionario (Auténtico), running respectively for president and vice president of the republic. This document contained a plan for government that was developed by the association.⁴⁷

On countless occasions Cuban Rotary clubs demonstrated their capacity to exercise pressure well beyond the nation’s territorial boundaries. Generally, members would further their projects by means of complex negotiations with their counterparts in other countries and would subsequently receive the support they required. The majority of these negotiations were undertaken with the United States, with the clear intention of obtaining benefits for Cuba. These kinds of negotiations were accomplished either through the collective participation of all the clubs within the country, by a distinct group of clubs seeking help with a specific regional issue, or by one single club alone, which was usually the club in Havana. However, according to the latter, the club was “always supported by other clubs in the District.”⁴⁸

Cuban Rotarians sought to defend Cuba’s image when confronted with nonsense published as yellow journalism in the United States. Soon after the RCH was founded, they were involved in a battle to deny accusations that Cuba was affected by yellow fever and that, furthermore, the country was inhospitable in its treatment of tourists. Members of the club in Havana launched a written campaign, asking various clubs in the United States to rectify the situation in their locale. The campaign received positive results, and clubs in the United States eventually sent their Cuban counterparts clippings from U.S. newspapers where the false information had been retracted. “However, the club of Colorado makes it clear [in their letter] that only the information that concerns the existence of yellow fever in Cuba was rectified. Stories having to do with various abuses committed by the tourist industry were not retracted, since victims of these had been several Rotarians from this area.” Members responded to this with shows of pride in the interest of

enhancing the country's reputation to ensure that the economy would not be affected, especially tourism. "At the suggestion of Mr. Julio Blanco Herrera, it was agreed upon that we would respond to your club in order to indicate that isolated instances of abuse should not give motivation for generalizations . . . and to inform you that the Rotary Club of Havana has already established an information bureau with the objective of avoiding further isolated cases."⁴⁹

In other instances, acts of international pressure even extended into U.S. congressional sessions. In April 1924, for example, Cuban Rotarians looked for ways to persuade this legislative body to issue an official recognition of Cuba's sovereignty over the Isla de Pinos through the proposed Hay-Quesada treaty.⁵⁰ During debates surrounding the signing of the treaty, the president of the RCH proposed that "since [this] issue of great importance comes nearer to a court ruling, I propose to my fellow Rotarians that, through the mediation of the governor of our district, we ask Rotary International to use their good and diligent means to encourage the United States Congress—adopting the just rulings issued by the corresponding committees—to proceed to a prompt resolution."⁵¹ Cuban Rotarians sought to involve, with much tact, their counterparts in other parts of the world. The path of political action traveled from the Rotary Club of Havana to the governor of the Cuban district; from there, it followed to the governing body of the organization and then to the U.S. Congress. Negotiations in this case were planned at a national level to solicit the participation of the highest-ranking representative of the Rotary Club in Cuba. Although the function of the governor of District 25 was to represent Rotary International within Cuba, it remains very clear that his duties were not to convert himself into the faithful servant of foreign interests (even if, eventually, this too could have occurred). It is important to stress how these structures of domination, generated within the context of U.S. imperial power, could also be subverted to obtain benefits for the country. Instruments of subjection were now employed to obtain the recognition of Cuba's sovereignty over a fragment of the nation's territory, a territory that had been left pending only to later be seized.

More intriguing still, everything seems to indicate that the initiative of the Rotary Club of Havana was an alliance between Cuban Rotarians and the Cuban government to obtain the ratification of the treaty. In a note of April 3, 1924, apparently written by Cosme de la Torriente, Cuban ambassador to Washington, to the Cuban secretary of state for foreign affairs, and marked "confidential," Rotary clubs were encouraged to intervene in the matter. "It would be advisable, without it seeming that I have suggested it, that the Rotary clubs of Cuba obtain assistance within the country so that

all come forth and voice their support of the ratification of the treaty concerning Isla de Pinos before the American Senate.”⁵² This maneuver was an attempt to counter campaigns that were launched from Isla de Pinos by U.S. citizens residing on the island who portrayed themselves as victims of supposed abuses committed by the Cuban government, a strategy aimed at preventing ratification of the agreement. These campaigns led Rotarians to close ranks around government authorities. Finally, Isla de Pinos, the second most important island in the Cuban archipelago, was recognized as an integral part of the nation on March 13, 1925.⁵³ What is truly important about this case is that the Cuban government decided to rely on these associations to achieve the successful resolution of a matter of state. Cuban government officials understood that Rotarians had access to mechanisms that permitted them to sway U.S. public opinion as well as to influence government authorities in the United States.

Rotary clubs in Cuba were essentially made up of the urban middle class, composed of three subgroups: small industrialists, businessmen, and university professionals. Essentially, clubs formed a small universe with ample space for social sectors spanning the small and medium urban bourgeoisie to distinguished members of the country’s elite. The cases presented in this study demonstrate that Rotary clubs became a force capable of influencing the socioeconomic development of the country in general and, more specifically, of the region where they were established. The zealous defense of local production and the local and national image, the impulse to create infrastructure to achieve socioeconomic development and the systematic intervention in all matters of interest to the public constitute irrefutable proof of this.

Although regional civic power in Cuba involved many more actors than can be addressed in a chapter of this scope, Rotarians played a very important role in this sphere. They had an exceptional organizational structure that simultaneously connected them with the most remote villages and the highest echelons of an international hierarchy. Their focus on the public sphere as a central territory for Rotarian intervention made them a pressure group and a powerful network. They intervened regularly at the local, municipal, provincial, national, and even international levels to guarantee the implementation of their projects. That this organization included members with very powerful connections adds an important element to the study of the capacity of their actions. These connections were sometimes invoked in a publicly transparent manner, at other times behind closed doors; a strategic telegram,

letter, or private visit might be enough to catalyze a movement, pass a piece of legislation, secure the signing of a treaty, or reshape a policy plan. Cuba's Rotary clubs were social networks that could reach every possible sphere.

Notes

1. Barcia, *Capas populares y modernidad en Cuba*; Guerra López, *El legado social de los españoles en Cuba*; Funes Monzote, *El despertar del asociacionismo científico en Cuba*; Caveda Romani, *Las sociedades filarmónicas habaneras*.

2. Without being studies of sociability properly speaking, some studies have explored British-American forms of association to one degree or another; for example, Pérez, *On Becoming Cuban*; Reig Romero, *YMCA de La Habana*; Vega Suñol, *Norteamericanos en Cuba*. See also Fariñas Borrego, *Sociabilidad y cultura del ocio*, an earlier study of mine on Havana's elite clubs, for a more in-depth discussion of sociability and forms of association, esp. 7–18.

3. Fariñas Borrego, *Sociabilidad y cultura del ocio*, 20–21.

4. Fariñas Borrego, “El asociacionismo náutico en La Habana,” 145–50.

5. This, of course, has occurred due to the fact that freemasonry has been linked to a Latin American movement of independence. In consequence, it has won the favor of historians that largely focus their studies on the process of emerging nation-states and independence struggles. An important work on freemasonry in Cuba is Torres-Cuevas, *Historia de la masonería en Cuba*, who proposes that there was little U.S. influence on the irregular masonic corps founded by Vicente Antonio de Castro y Bermúdez under the name Gran Oriente de Cuba y las Antillas (GOCA); see esp. 113–20.

6. Torres-Cuevas, *Historia de la masonería en Cuba*.

7. The list of cities around the world where clubs were founded is impressive: Dublin, Belfast, and London (1911); Glasgow (1912); Honolulu (1915); Havana (1916); San Juan and Montevideo (1918); Panama City, Buenos Aires, Calcutta, Shanghai, and Manila (1919); Tokyo and Madrid (1920); and Paris, Copenhagen, Melbourne, St. John's, Johannesburg, Wellington, Lima, and Mexico City (1921). Rotary Internacional, Distrito 25, *Memoria del año oficial*, 30.

8. *Diccionario Enciclopédico UTEHA*, T-IX, 119.

9. Añorga, “El rotarismo en Cuba,” 951.

10. Marinello, “Influencia del rotarismo en el progreso de la humanidad,” 6.

11. International Association of Rotary Clubs, *Seventh Annual Convention*, 133–34.

12. Acevedo Laborde, *Manual*, 179.

13. This goal meant that each member could be understood as an “ambassador of their profession,” according to Acevedo Laborde, *Manual*, 4. In this sense the tireless search to effect leadership was one of the fundamental premises of Rotary, an intention registered even in the statutes of each club that demanded that each associate be a guiding force in his area of work or profession. See Marinello, “Influencia del rotarismo en el progreso de la humanidad,” 6.

14. García Blanco, *Cien figuras de la ciencia en Cuba*, 394; Archivo Nacional de Cuba

(hereafter ANC), Fondo Registro de Asociaciones (hereafter FRA), 1-697, E-18104, 20, 52, 57, 100, 121; ANC, FRA, 1-697, E-18105, 34.

15. Rionda, *El Club Rotario de Pinar del Río*, 44. This preliminary structure could be modified at some future point with the admission of new members.

16. Rionda, *El Club Rotario de Pinar del Río*, 44-45.

17. Rotary International, *Conferencia del Distrito 25*. The other three individuals appear to be classified in ways that are incompatible with those that have been presented thus far, or the information provided for them is insufficient.

18. Lista de socios del Club Rotario de la Habana del 23 de febrero de 1940. From ANC, FRA, L-697, E-18105, 17-28.

19. At least six individuals were difficult to classify due to their foreign status or presented information that is difficult to catalog.

20. "Por los clubs del distrito: La labor del rotarismo," *La nota rotaria* 2, no. 9 (June 1923): 21.

21. Rionda, *El Club Rotario*, 68.

22. In 1953, after a reorganization of Rotary International, Cuba's district number was changed to 101, by which point there were fifty-one clubs in the country; Añorga, "El rotarismo en Cuba," 952.

23. "Tercera conferencia del distrito 25 de Rotary Internacional celebrada en Santiago de Cuba los días 2, 3 y 4 de marzo de 1923," *La nota rotaria* 1, no. 7 (April 1923): 9.

24. "Tercera conferencia del distrito 25 de Rotary Internacional."

25. "Por los clubs del distrito: La labor del rotarismo," *La Nota Rotaria* 2, no. 14 (November 1923): 17.

26. Archivo Histórico Provincial de Santiago de Cuba. Fondo Gobierno Provincial, 1-2407, E-5, 9.

27. Fondo Gobierno Provincial, 1-2407, E-5, 10.

28. Fondo Gobierno Provincial, 1-2407, E-5, 10.

29. Rionda, *El Club Rotario*, 141-49.

30. Rionda, *El Club Rotario*, 143.

31. Rionda, *El Club Rotario*, 141.

32. Rionda, *El Club Rotario*, 59.

33. Rionda, *El Club Rotario*, 58.

34. Rionda, *El Club Rotario*, 60.

35. Rionda, *El Club Rotario*, 62.

36. Rionda, *El Club Rotario*, 63.

37. ANC, Fondo Especial (FE), C-6, N-15.

38. Primelles, *Crónica Cubana, 1919-1922*, 544.

39. Primelles, *Crónica Cubana, 1919-1922*, 544.

40. López Civeira, *Cuba entre 1899 y 1959*, 64-65; "Aclaración del Rotary Club de la Habana," *La Nota Rotaria* 2, no. 14 (November 1923): 15.

41. Pichardo, *Documentos para la historia de Cuba*, 3: 140-50.

42. Club Rotario de La Habana, *Haciendo patria y Club Rotario de la Habana, Actividades desarrolladas*.

43. ANC, FRA, 1-697, E-18104, 114.
44. Acevedo Laborde, *Manual*, 434.
45. Acevedo Laborde, *Manual*, 434-35. The manual also quoted from Martí: "A citizen who stops voting is like a soldier who deserts."
46. Rotary Internacional, Distrito 25, *Memoria*, 291.
47. ANC, FE, C-2, no. 134.
48. Acevedo Laborde, *Manual*, 424.
49. "El Club rotario de La Habana," *Diario de la Marina*, January 5, 1917, 1.
50. Álvarez Estévez, *Isla de Pinos y el tratado Hay-Quesada*. To date, there is no evidence as to whether or not members put up money in order to lobby or bribe U.S. legislators. Rather, it seems that U.S. interest and investments in Cuba had far more of a bearing on their decision to ratify the treaty. The contrary would have strained relations between Cuba and the United States, given the degree of public interest the Isla de Pinos affair had generated within Cuban society.
51. Acevedo Laborde, *Manual*, 439.
52. Álvarez Estévez, *Isla de Pinos*, 113.
53. Álvarez Estévez, *Isla de Pinos*, 88.