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Rebellion, Revolution, and “The Devil’s Plant”:
Challenges to State Control in Colonial Cuba∗

by Charlotte A. Cosner

Often described as Spain’s “ever-faithful isle,” Cuba remained loyal to the
Crown while nearly all of Spain’s New World colonies gained their independence.
While independence eluded the island, periodic rebellion occurred, often led by
those involved in the tobacco sector, namely growers and cigar workers. These
tobacco workers provide insight into the colonial period by demonstrating the
challenges to state control in colonial Cuba.

During Cuba’s colonial history, these challenges to state control spanned
three periods and took three different forms. Early in the Cuban colonial period,
from 1492 to 1717, the tobacco farmers, or vegueros, often supported by the
Catholic Church, opposed measures aimed at bringing tobacco under tax
regulations that would limit profits. Later, from 1717 to 1817, vegueros openly
rebelled against the Spanish monopoly on tobacco. From 1817, the end of the
tobacco monopoly, to the end of Spanish colonial rule in 1898, tabaqueros, or cigar
workers, replaced the tobacco farmers as threats to state security, financing the
independence movement, both from within the island and abroad.

Similarities between Vegueros and Tabaqueros

Apart from a common industry in which they worked, tobacco farmers and
growers shared other characteristics, particularly region, class, ethnicity, and race.”

∗ The author would like to thank Kris E. Lane, Peter Muller, and particularly Martha Few
for their comments and advice on this and similar papers dealing with Cuba’s tobacco industry.

∗ Gender is not included in this study as men dominated the tobacco industry both as
tobacco growers and later as cigar workers. Although women’s first non-domestic jobs outside of the
home were in the cigar industry, I have found no information regarding the state’s attempt to
specifically regulate or control women in this sector.
Although grown in several areas of the country, Cuba's best tobacco flourished in the areas surrounding the capital, particularly in the east, later known as Nueva Filipina or Pinar del Río. Although the vegueros lived in rural isolation, their proximity to Havana posed a greater threat to state security, especially in times of rebellion, than areas farther removed from the capital.

Cattle, tobacco, and sugar, Cuba's three main colonial agricultural pursuits, created a distinct four-tiered class system. At the top were large landowners of all kinds, and their urban counterparts, including merchants and lawyers. As with other colonies, native-born Spaniards, or Creoles, comprised this top echelon. Small landowners fell farther down on the social scale, behind the rich rural or urban elite. Small tobacco farmers, along with skilled tradesmen working in the cities, such as the tabaquero, made up the equivalent of the middle class. The lowest free sector included landless peasants forced to work on other people's land for wages. Black slaves held the lowest social rank of all of Cuba's colonial residents before emancipation.

Well-educated, often in Europe, and holding high social and economic rank in the New World, Creoles only wanted to shift the colonial system, eliminating the Crown and taking over the highest positions themselves. Those in the middle sectors, small landowners and skilled urban laborers, although not bound by slavery like those at the bottom of the socio-economic scale, benefitted little from maintaining the colonial status quo. Therefore, providing for themselves and their families made up their main concerns, and when the state threatened their livelihood, they responded by attempting to overthrow the Spanish system.

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2 Jaime Suchlicki, Cuba from Columbus to Castro and Beyond, 4th ed. (Washington and London: Brassey's, 1997), p. 43.
In addition to differences of economic class, Creoles viewed the vegueros as social pariahs because of their ethnic origins. During the early seventeenth century, the Crown realized the economic potential of the tobacco industry, authorizing its expansion into new areas. To provide the additional labor needed, Cuba encouraged Canary Islanders to immigrate to the island and grow tobacco. Moving into the island’s isolated, unpopulated areas, the state gave the immigrants farms for little or no rent.\(^3\) Described as talented at agricultural pursuits, Canary Islanders, later encouraged to immigrate to supplement the agricultural labor force, suffering from a declining slave population, could not tolerate the island’s heat as well as Africans, one writer noted.\(^4\)

Tabaqueros also faced similar economic, ethnic, and racial discrimination. Although few slaves worked in the tobacco industry, compared to large sugar estates which averaged two hundred slaves, by 1867 significant numbers of free blacks worked in the tobacco industry. Slaves made up less than one-quarter of all tobacco workers, however after emancipation in 1886, ex-slaves entered the tobacco fields and factories as wage laborers.\(^5\)

State Control and Challenges to Authority

Not only did the tobacco sector contest the Spanish Crown’s authority, but also Spain’s attempts to regulate and control the industry during its more than

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\(^3\) Núñez Jiménez, pp. 497-498.
\(^4\) Maturin M. Ballou, *Due South; or Cuba, Past and Present*, (Boston and New York: Houghton, Mifflin, 1885), p. 61.
four hundred years of rule. Spain’s response to tobacco followed three periods, ranging first from 1492 to 1717, 1717 to 1817, and lastly 1817 to 1898. Over these three periods, Spain altered the way in which it regulated the tobacco industry, beginning with moderate involvement, followed by complete state control, and finally returning to moderate regulation.

As an island located at the entrance to the Caribbean Sea and Spanish Main, Cuba’s geography aided Spain in further exploration of the region, and ensured political and military stability. The island served as the starting point for much of Spain’s expansion into North and Central America, including Francisco Hernández’s brief Florida expedition and Hernan Cortes’s conquest of Mexico. Unlike the mainland, where rebellion and insurrection could originate from either inside the region or outside, presenting a threat to the state, Cuba’s island geography lessened such outside threats. Additionally, for those rebelling against the state, escape into a neighboring area would prove more difficult.

Challenges to the state in colonial Cuba illustrate a unique context for this period, as the island was one of the Spanish Crown’s strongest centers of authority in the New World. By the late sixteenth century, Cuba’s governor also received the title of captain-general, adding military authority to the position’s existing civil powers. Subject to the Viceroy of New Spain, described as the “highest royal official in the New World,” Cuba’s governor captain-general enjoyed virtual autonomy in the administration of his duties. Spain’s elaborate colonial political system, strengthened by additional powers granted to Spanish officials, held together and resisted the wave of independence sweeping the region until the late nineteenth century.

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7 Suchlicki, p. 22.
Phase 1: Discovery to Monopoly, 1492-1717

During this period from 1492, the discovery of the island and the plant, to 1717 when Spain created a tobacco monopoly, Spain established regulations but primarily responded to the industry as it related to other agricultural pursuits. Displaying preferences to other industries such as cattle ranching or sugar, which had not yet obtained its later economic importance, the state attempted to ensure that tax laws and other regulations were enforced, but did not seek to completely control the industry. During this period, *vegueros* found a powerful ally in the Catholic Church however, which often interceded on their behalf.

Europeans first saw tobacco between November 2 and 5, 1492 during inland explorations of Cuba. Two members of Christopher Columbus’ crew, Rodrigo de Xerez and Luis de Torres, viewed the Cuban Amerindians using tobacco. While debate surrounds the date and identity of those who introduced the plant into Europe, Fernando Ortiz argues that it had reached the continent’s port cities before the mid-1500s. Tobacco in all of its uses, especially smoking and snuff, quickly gained popularity in Europe. By the early seventeenth century, the issue divided Europeans whom either approved of its use, or cursed it, such as the anonymously published *Counterblaste to Tobacco*, later attributed to James I of Great Britain.

Colonial Cuba engaged in several agricultural pursuits, including native-grown tobacco, and sugar, imported from the Canary Islands. Shortly after

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9 Ibid., p. 193, 221.


11 Suchlicki, p. 26. The latter did not assume economic importance until the eighteenth and particularly nineteenth centuries.
Cuban tobacco farmers started to grow the plant, they faced tougher governmental regulations than the island’s sugar growers. While sugar received concessions from the Crown, tobacco growers faced greater restrictions. For example, a royal decree dated January 15, 1529 exempted all sugar mills and their equipment from attachments due to debt, except Crown obligations. This meant that sugar growers did not need to fear seizure of their equipment for failure to pay a debt, instead a creditor could sell the mill’s product, such as sugar or syrup.12

The state’s attitude toward tobacco changed however after 1570, as tobacco became a lucrative crop for Cuba, bringing the industry into conflict with other agricultural endeavors. The island’s governor, Gaspar de Toro, formalized the planting of tobacco around the city of Havana in 1580.13 As the number of tobacco vegas grew and expanded into additional territory, other farmers protested. Cattle ranchers complained to the Spanish authorities, concerned about the decreasing amount of land available for pasture, and access to the rivers. Governor Juan de Salamanca decided in favor of the vegueros, marking the beginning of Cuba’s shift from cattle ranching to tobacco. Similarly, this action caused a significant blow to the cattle industry that exported nearly 300,000 hides between 1570 and 1590.14 Hacendados continued to protest the expansion of vegas throughout the island. In response, the Crown issued a decree on March 30,

12 Ortiz, p. 277, 286.
13 Marrero, p. 231.
1669 prohibiting the cultivation of tobacco within a ten-league (approximately 30 mile) radius of the Cuban capital.15

Another powerful colonial actor, the Catholic Church, often sided with the farmers against the state. Allying themselves with the vegueros presented not only religious, but economic opportunities for the Church. Vegas, small, river-bottom farms, and the towns that sprang up around them provided the Catholic Church with additional parishioners and income. Receiving landholdings from the Crown, and bequests of land and monetary gifts from tobacco farmers, the Church accumulated significant wealth. Tobacco later came under the tithe laws, allowing the Church to receive 10 percent of all tobacco earnings. Preservation of the tobacco industry and its ability to make a profit directly affected the Catholic Church in colonial Cuba. Therefore, when the governor tried to levy taxes on vegas and other tobacco industry-related goods in 1682, the convents loudly protested.16

By the end of this first period, 1492 to 1717, tobacco farmers constituted a potential threat to state authority, controlling an increasingly valuable economic crop, and comprising one-fifth of the island's total white population.17 The vegueros had found powerful allies in the Catholic Church, and opponents in the cattle ranchers who resented the expansion of the industry. Juxtaposed against these groups, the Spanish state enjoyed little economic proceeds from the cultivation and processing of the so-called "devil's plant."*

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16 Ortiz, pp. 216-217. Clergy grew tobacco for their own use, and export.
17 Marrero, p. 231.
* Ortiz notes that the Eastern Church in Constantinople called tobacco "the devil's plant." (p. 232.)
Phase 2: Spain’s Tobacco Monopoly, 1717-1817

As tobacco’s economic importance increased over the previous period, Spain realized its potential. Ordering the establishment of a royal monopoly, the Crown prevented growers from selling tobacco to anyone other than the state. Cuba’s first serious threats to Spanish state authority and control occurred during this second period, from 1717 to 1817, when *vegueros* openly revolted against the Crown, resulting in a siege of Havana and the expulsion the island’s highest Spanish political and military leader, the governor.

By the eighteenth century, tobacco was one of Cuba’s primary export items. Rising demand from the Europeans and high profits for those in the private sector made Spain contemplate tobacco’s true economic potential.\(^{18}\) Wanting greater control over tobacco, Spain took measures to create a monopoly. Before the state established its monopoly in 1717, Spanish officials traveled to different regions of the island inquiring about the prices paid to *vegueros* by contrabandlers, pirates and others.\(^{19}\) Although paid in advance at fixed state prices that closely matched those received before the monopoly, the *vegueros* resented state control of their industry, opposing Spain’s plan to purchase Cuban tobacco at low prices and sell it on the European market at inflated levels.\(^{20}\)

As before, the Church interceded on the side of the tobacco farmers against the Spanish state. Representatives of several religious communities including the Dominicans, Franciscans, Augustinians, and the abbess of Havana’s nuns sent a letter of protest to the King. The orders argued that money paid to the Catholic Church by the tobacco growers helped to support the religious communities, and that a monopoly would seriously affect the Church’s economic status. As tensions

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\(^{18}\) Suchlicki, p. 27.

\(^{19}\) Rivero Muñiz, *Tabaco: Su historia*, p. 90.

\(^{20}\) Suchlicki, p. 27.
heightened, representatives of the Church attended city council meetings to try to reach a compromise and avoid conflict between the Spanish state and the tobacco growers.21

In an August 6, 1717 city council session, the farmers’ requests to end the monopoly were denied. Seventeen vegueros responded in a letter noting the growers’ repeated defense of the island as militia members. Many growers were very poor, the letter continued, not even owning the land they worked. Surely the Cabildo would take these issues into consideration, the farmers pleaded.22

Over the next several weeks, public outcry over the tobacco monopoly increased. Armed groups of Cuban vegueros gathered at Jesús del Monte, near the capital, and marched on Havana, encircling it and preventing reinforcements from reaching the governor and his soldiers. Renouncing his position, Governor Vicente Raja returned to Spain, marking the “first violent expulsion of a Captain General” in Cuban colonial history.23 Replaced the same year by a new governor, Gregorio Guazo Calderón reinstated the tobacco monopoly, after making some minor concessions to the farmers.24

By June 1720, more than two hundred tobacco growers again revolted, burning houses and crops around Santiago de las Vegas, a town located near the capital. The state responded to this second revolt by detaining individuals in and around Havana believed to be the principal leaders of the movement. Learning that the state had increased the capital’s defenses, the vegueros decided against attacking the city and planned to lay siege to Havana instead. Again, the clergy

21 José Rivero Muñiz, Las tres sediciones de los vegueros en el siglo XVIII, (Havana: Academia de la Historia de Cuba, 1951), p. 27.
22 Ibid., pp. 29-31.
23 Ibid., p. 33, 38.
tried to intervene as mediators, but the farmers refused to listen, although they later agreed to return to their homes.25

Over the next two years, Cuba experienced relative calm, yet tobacco farmers’ complaints of payments in kind and on terms led to increased tensions between the growers and the state. The growers made several demands. The poorest farmers appealed to the state to allow them to sell at slightly higher prices directly to the urban cigar and cigarette factories, while others demanded the expulsion of the governor. When their demands went unanswered, they threatened to no longer plant tobacco until prices increased, and to burn all ground tobacco inside Havana, including tobacco found in the royal stores.26

This time the tobacco farmers did not present a united front against the state. Some farmers resisted joining the rebellion, noting that the crop was their only way of supporting themselves and their families.27 The alliance between the tobacco growers started to divide along socio-economic lines, with the poorest refusing to participate. Even towns that developed around the tobacco industry in eastern Cuba sought protection from the state from the rebelling vegueros who threatened to destroy property. Thus, the state succeeded in maintaining control and preventing widespread revolution as in previous uprisings, and slowly regained the loyalty of many residents of Cuba’s eastern tobacco region.

In their final revolt, farmers gathered at San Miguel del Padrón in February 1723, and removed the growing tobacco plants, first in their own fields, and later in nearby plots. Many agreed not to plant the crop for two years, waiting instead

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26 Ibid., p. 67, pp. 69-71.
27 Ibid., pp. 69-71.
for higher prices. Guazo Calderón, Cuba's governor, warned the tobacco growers that the state intended to punish dissenters by death.28

As the revolt continued, the people of San Felipe and Santiago de Bejucal asked the governor for help. To protect the locals, the state sent soldiers, who arrived in Santiago de las Vegas on February 20. Learning that at least six hundred vegueros camped approximately three miles away, the soldiers and farmers squared off. Following the wounding of one soldier, the military responded violently, leaving many wounded and capturing eleven tobacco farmers, some of whom were hurt. Marching the vegueros to Jesús del Monte, they were held in the local jail. More than one hundred armed men gathered the following evening in Guanabacoa, planning to rescue the imprisoned farmers. Instead, the prisoners were executed; the Spanish government hung the farmers' bodies from trees along roadways leading to the capital for two days as a warning against further revolts.29

By the early 1800s, sugar increasingly emerged as Cuba's primary economic product, resulting in a decrease in tobacco's importance as a crop. Land prices rose quickly, due in large part to the expansion of the sugar industry. The number of tobacco farms declined, a consequence of the shift of land to sugar use, as large sugar estates pushed growers off their land. Spain's preference of sugar to tobacco eventually led to the end of the tobacco monopoly, one hundred years after it was first established.30

Tobacco farmers, living in rural isolation, held strong attachment to the land they worked, developing a fiercely independent spirit.31 Based on that trait and other factors, such as region, class, and ethnicity, the vegueros' role in the first

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28 Ibid., pp. 71-75.
29 Ibid., pp. 81-93.
30 Suchlicki, p. 27; Pérez, Cuba: Between Reform, p. 56; Marrero, p. 232.
31 Schwartz, p. 74.
serious protests against the Spanish Crown was not unexpected. Leading the island’s first economically-based revolt, they were the first Cubans to “suffer the rigors of Spanish tyranny.”

Although originating earlier, the second period from 1717 to 1817, the tobacco monopoly, cemented the historic link between Cubans working in the tobacco sector and their challenges to Spanish state power.

Tobacco continued to be the primary crop grown by those of modest means, and accustomed to live in rural isolation, although some regueros near the capital held slightly higher economic positions. Yet, challenges to state authority emanating from the tobacco sector shifted to urban areas, primarily the capital. As the nineteenth century progressed, the Cuban economy became increasingly industrialized. Tabaqueros assumed the role previously held by the tobacco growers, challenging the state’s power in different ways than before.

Phase 3: The Tabaqueros and the Independence Movement, 1817-1898

Following the first two phases from 1492 to 1717, and 1717 to 1817, this final period spanned the end of colonial rule, and marked a shift in the actors challenging state authority. With the monopoly removed and sugar starting to replace tobacco as the island’s primary agricultural enterprise, Spain returned to nominal regulation of the tobacco industry. Producing tobacco into smokable products such as cigars and cigarettes, comprised one of Cuba’s primary industrial sectors, and employed 20,000 cigar workers in 1860, with nearly 75 percent residing in the capital. During this period, cigar and cigarette workers employed in urban factories, not rural growers, presented the potential threat to the Spanish

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33 Rivero Muñiz, Tabaco: Su historia, p. 160.
34 Stubbs, p. 67 quoted in Schwartz, p. 75.
state's stability. Either remaining on the island or emigrating to Florida, cigar workers increasingly espoused revolutionary ideas through their mutual aid societies and workroom readers. Exiles in Florida became especially active in the independence effort, financing the revolutionary movement.

As cigar and cigarette making moved out of the home and into the factory during the nineteenth century, tabaqueros soon organized into mutual aid societies, developing political consciousness as they listened to lectores, or readers. Wanting to make cigars and cigarettes in the urban factories, tabaqueros used readers, to not only help them pass the time, but also for educational purposes. First established in 1864 at the Viñas cigar factory in Bejucal, near Havana, cigar makers listened to readers presenting educational, popular, and political material. These daily readings often included revolutionary newspapers, eventually becoming the catalyst for the island’s independence movement.35 Although initially innocent in nature, the government feared the potential for revolution and outlawed the readers in 1866, however anarchists ensured the increasing political and revolutionary nature of the cigar workroom readings, sometimes becoming readers themselves.36

Declining cigar exports in the late 1880s and early 1890s presented serious economic problems in Cuba. Employing over 100,000 people in all phases of the industry from growing to manufacturing, the closure of cigar factories in the capital created shockwaves in Havana and surrounding areas where the plant was primarily grown and processed. By the early 1890s, nearly 75 percent of the island’s cigar workers were unemployed, while the remainder only worked part-

36 Schwartz, pp. 78-79.
time. Slavery's abolition several years earlier added additional workers to an already bleak job market, only worsening the economic situation for the tobacco sector. Fleeing such economic conditions, and increasing political struggle, thousands of families left for Florida, congregating in towns like Key West and Tampa, where approximately 10,000 worked in the cigar industry.  

In Florida's cigar factories, exiled Cubans rallied around the independence movement on the island. Establishing a Día de la Patria where the day's wages were contributed to the revolutionary movement's funds, support for revolution ran deep. A sign in the Eduardo H. Gato factory announced that anyone against Cuban independence should find work elsewhere, as it was the factory of "free Cuba." When Cuban patriot José Martí sought funds for the revolutionary forces, some of his greatest support came from the cigar workers in Tampa and Key West. One author noted the tabaquero's importance to Cuba's separation from Spain, writing, "it is without doubt that our independence is narrowly tied to the tobacco sector..."

Prosperity for the sugar growers in the nineteenth century meant harder economic times for the tobacco sector with high interest rates, low returns on investments, and farmers selling part of their land to save the rest. Several forms of landownership slowly diminished including the sharecropper, tenant, and small independent farmer. Unemployment, peasant displacement and other factors led to a rise in social banditry during the late nineteenth century. Some of these

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38 Castañeda, pp. 23-24.
40 Castañeda, p. 17.
bandits readily moved from social protest to revolutionary activity, converted during their years as cigar workers in Florida.41

The Vegueros’ and Tabaqueros’ Impact

In colonial Cuba, few groups successfully challenged the authority of the Spanish state. Two groups who engaged in armed revolt, or financially supported the island’s independence movement were the vegueros and tabaqueros. Joined by a livelihood centered on tobacco, these two groups shared similar status in colonial society. Marginalized by their lack of wealth, proper social standing, ethnicity or race, vegueros and tabaqueros occupied a secondary position in Cuba’s society.

While cigar workers lived in the city, the rural veguero was particularly marginalized. Easily distinguished by his manner of dress, the tobacco farmer, like many in the common class, spent less than five dollars per person a year on clothing. He primarily wore a shirt and pants, pigskin shoes, and no hat, preferring to wear a handkerchief on his head.42 A writer in 1845 described the tobacco farmer as

“moderately robust, lazy, happy, sociable, and fond of poetry, music, song, dance, roosters [a reference to cockfights], and to all pleasant distractions, being very frequent the rubbing and mixture with the African race.”43

During the colonial era in Cuba, the vegueros and tabaqueros presented challenges to state control over three separate periods, employing three different

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41 Pérez, Lords of the Mountain, p. 16, pp. 18-45.
43 Rodríguez-Ferrer, pp. 68-69.
strategies. In the first period, dating from 1492 to 1717, tobacco farmers, supported by the Catholic Church, opposed measures aimed at giving the state greater control over the burgeoning tobacco industry. This opposition led to armed violence during the second phase from 1717 to 1817 when Spain established an official monopoly on tobacco. As the revolts increased, tobacco farmers and local townspeople became divided, some choosing to follow the Crown out of economic necessity. Yet, as the veguero alliance crumbled, cigar workers replaced the tobacco growers, challenging the state's economic authority, in addition to its very political existence. These cigar workers, particularly those in exile in Florida, created the ultimate challenge to state authority, helping to topple the Spanish regime.
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About the author

Charlotte A. Cosner graduated from Virginia Commonwealth University in 1991 where she earned her Bachelor's degree in history with a minor in international studies. Receiving her 1997 master's degree in InterAmerican studies from the University of Miami, she wrote her thesis on the United States economic embargo of Cuba. Currently, she is working toward a doctoral degree in Latin American history at the University of Miami, and plans to write her dissertation on the tobacco farmers of colonial Cuba.

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