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From handcrafted tobacco rolls to machine-made cigarettes: the transformation and Americanization of
Puerto Rican tobacco, 1847-1903

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The most reputed tobacco growing district of Cuba, Vuelta Abajo, became the major theater of operations during the 1897 and 1898 campaigns of the Spanish army for Cuban independence (1895–1898). The conflict dislocated production and the relocation policies of the Spanish regime severely constrained the time that growers and work hands could dedicate to the plantations (González Fernández 1996: 310–3). At the end of the war, large areas of the heavy and sandy clay soils were barren and laid waste (Lestina 1940: 45–6). Seed for the 1898–99 harvest was scarce and needed to be imported from other areas, for corporate and individual planters required excellent seed to maintain the markets and international reputation of their leaf. According to the author, Ángel González del Valle (1929: 61–2), growers generally imported it from Puerto Rico.

Following the Spanish-American War, many residents of the United States came to Puerto Rico surveyed Puerto Rico for their newspapers, for business opportunities, and for government agencies. One of these (Ceballos & Co. 1899) appraised tobacco factories extant in 1898–1899 as follows:

Rucabado and Portela are the owners of *La Flor de Caye*

to Austria and Prussia in the 1870s (Fawcett 1907: 210), the Hanseatic ports of Hamburg and Bremen imported large amounts of leaf from the Dominican Republic as early as the 1840s (Baud 1988: 89–90), and American and European merchants habitually bought Havana cigars from the onset of the century (Gottesegen 1940: 140–1; Ortiz 1947: 307–8). In Spain itself, the king instructed the directors of the Royal factories in 1817 to “manufacture in imitation of the leaf remitted from the Havana factory, improving, where possible, their manufacture” (Pérez Vidal 1959: 324).

Smoker and abstinent considered Vuelta Abajo leaf from Cuba and the rolled Havana cigars to be truly exceptional. “How Havana tobacco entered upon its conquest of the world”³ is well known, and Fernando Ortiz (1947) recapitulated concisely:

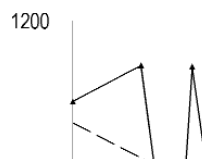
As civil liberties triumphed and political constitutions were guaranteed, the cigar came into the ascendancy once

be known as *de mata* or stalk-cut. They then let it wilt under the basking sun in the field, and, finally, carried it to the curing barn. Once in the barn, the stalks were cut into sticks, which in turn, hung from the ceiling of the building (Aguayo 1876: 58). This harvesting technique, dominant in the early nineteenth century, started a way to what domestic growers, as well as those in other latitudes, called the stalk-cut method. When the plant started to mature, known when the lower leaves started to turn yellow, the farmer or his employees proceeded to cut the leaves from the stalk down in pairs, known as *mancuernas*, which were immediately classified as stalk-cut filler tobacco. Each plant went through two to four such cuttings. The pairs of leaves, first hung across a man's arms, were slipped off on so called "tobacco sticks," known as *cujes* and more recently as *varillas*, some three yards in length. The illustration shows several men carrying three *varillas* full of *mancuernas* as they were about to bring the sticks into a modest curing barn to be hung in order to dry the leaves (Aguayo 1876: 58; Van Leenhoff, Jr. 1905: 12).⁵ The differences between the two harvesting techniques affected the distribution of space and the internal structure of the barn.

By 1888 the men and women from the highlands had gained considerable

Small Cuban shops or buckeyes, known locally as *chinchales*, in opposition to export-oriented large manufactories, relied on other leaf sources, Puerto Rican leaf being one, to substitute the lesser grades of Cuban leaf in the manufacture of cigars and cigarettes for the domestic market (González Fernández 1999). Vuelta Abajo growers felt threatened enough, when Puerto Rican leaf was introduced in Cuba itself, to address the issue in writing (*Memoria sobre* 1877; Villalón 1999). Furthermore, the scarcity and high prices commanded by Cuban leaf on the eve of the war induced the Spanish tobacco monopoly to employ an inexpensive Puerto Rican leaf called *boliche* in the manufacture of cigarettes (Delgado 1999; Martín 1892: 64–5).⁹

Figure 3. Tobacco leaf imports to Puerto Rico, 1847–1895



(*La cuestión* 1885: 5). The most common cigar shape, the *breve*, began to be complemented by other shapes, *vitolas* in tobacco parlance, such as *regalías británicas* and others who consciously imitated Cuban vitolas, particularly the larger manufactories (Abad 1884: 29; Infiesta 1895: 209). By the end of the century the Havana model dominated the domestic cigar industry (*Sketches* 1904). Some manufactories, such as La Flor de Cayey, gained sufficient acceptance for their imitations (Infiesta 1895: 214) to become providers for the Royal Spanish Navy (Villar, Lanza y C^a. 1922).

Although the diffusion of the Havana craft stimulated the Puerto Rican cigar industry, it was not enough by itself because indigenous circumstances had not been as favorable. The second economic change refers to domestic conditions promoting the establishment of the factory system. A reexamination of the tobacco leaf exports presented in Figure 4 allows a partial explanation of these conditions. Figure 4 shows that the 1880s and early 1890s were years of contracting or slow expanding tobacco leaf exports. That is, the growth of domestic manufacture coincided with a period of declining leaf exports (1880–1894). It is likely that growers, merchants, and

manufacture. Whereas cigars remained hand rolled, cigarette manufacturing experienced a mechanization process that started with introduction shredding machines used to prepare the filler for cigarettes. Mechanical shredders, as the ones employed by La India Occidental, shredded, sifted, sieved, and separated the tobacco by size but left the rolling of the cigarettes in the hands of skilled cr (Abad 1884: 64, 71). The Emery, Allison, and Bonsack mechanical rollers used tobacco and paper as inputs to produce a finished cigarette in what has come to be known as continuous process production. These contrivances, the Bonsack in particular, squarely placed the control of production in the hands of factory operatives who did “little more than feed materials in the machines, keep an eye on the operations, and in some cases, when it was not yet done automatically, pack the product” (Chandler 1977: 249). In consequence, mechanical rollers effectively caused the disappearance of hand-rollers after the 1880s in the U.S. and elsewhere soon thereafter (Korzeniewicz 1989: 87; Rogoff 1994: 141–57). Figure 6 illustrates the reorganization of the factory as benches, hand-rollers, and knives gave way to machines handled by operatives. The figure shows several mechanical rollers, aligned a

La Colectiva sought to overcome another difficulty associated with the mechanized cigarette factories by relying on the original partnerships for a supply of filler and advertised so (Rucabado y Portela 1899) to capitalize on goodwill. Besides, Rucabado y Cía., one of the original partnerships, were themselves with considerable experience in financing tobacco production.

As the artisanal shop gave way to the capitalist factory, the relations between who stemmed tobacco leaf and those who crafted cigars and cigarettes experienced a profound transformation. The ways in which they worked and perceived tobacco and each other experienced deep modifications during the last quarter of the nineteenth century. Two significant social changes took place during the establishment and early expansion of the factory system.

First, a group if not class consciousness started to emerge among manufacturers. During the 1880s tobacco entrepreneurs started to identify themselves as a group to advance common economic interests. Their first documented activity was the tobacco pavilion within the fair-exposition held in 1882, in the southern municipality of Ponce, where several tobacco factories, houses of commerce, and

The development of the factory system in the hands of domestic entrepreneurs came to a halt in 1899, when the U.S. tobacco trust, the American Tobacco Company (ATC), made purchases consonant with its longstanding policy of growth and expansion in the cigarette business (U.S., Bureau of Corporations 1909: 180–93; Cox 1999). Puerto Rico became the first ATC investment in the Caribbean, when it set up both La Colectiva and La Internacional. The latter also manufactured cigars (León Paz 1900: 1826–1853; Portela v. The Porto Rican American Tobacco Co. 1901).

The Porto Rican-American Tobacco Company (PRATC) was incorporated in New Jersey on September 1899 by men connected to ATC. It bought the goodwill and manufacturing facilities held by La Colectiva for stock in the newly created corporation and a petty amount of cash.¹⁸ At the end of 1899, \$166,000 had been issued in stocks where ATC held \$99,100 and Rucabado y Portela the balance (U.S., Bureau of Corporations 1909: 82–3; Muñoz Morales 1900a: fols. 201–202). As part of the deal Fausto Rucabado and José Portela, the managing partners, entered the service of PRATC for one year. It was stipulated that PRATC would send them over to the Dominican Republic if the trust decided to venture

Other local factories used the same path and opened offices and establishments in New York to be closer to their clients. Portela's La Ultramarina survived the PRATC as a "principal factory" in Puerto Rico and tended its export business in the Manhattan tobacco district as early as 1900 (Paniagua 1900: 29). After the closure of the Providence manufactory, Mateo Rucabado maintained, for years, an office in the Flor de Cayey in Pearl Street, Manhattan (Mateo Rucabado 1904: 34). Other successful marketing strategies proved to be the booths and medals obtained in exhibitions in Buffalo, Chicago, and St. Louis by Infanzón and Rodríguez's La Habanera in 1902 and 1905 (*Puerto Rico Ilustrado* 1939: 86). In summary, over half of the cigar business remained outside the orbit of the trust as independents exported 57 percent of all cigars to the United States in 1906 (U.S., Bureau of Corporations 1909: 42).

Conclusion

⁹ Delgado was an assistant director of the Compañía Arrendataria de Tabaco, the Spanish tobacco monopoly.

¹⁰ A few were slaves who kept to the trade after emancipation in 1873 (Mayo Negrón Portillo, and Mayo López 1995: 39).

¹¹ This partly mechanized firm employed steam by 1899 and was located in the municipality of Mayagüez (Ceballos 1899).

¹² This figure includes the participation in Rucabado y Portela and the remainder of previous Rucabado partnerships. Refer to Muñoz Morales (1900a, 1900b).

¹³ After the war, Cuba enacted a tariff on leaf imports (Ramos Mattei 1974: 10).

¹⁴ The available documentation does not provide evidence that the contract came into effect. Apparently, it fell through, but Robert Graham aided their entry in the tobacco trade in the following years (Genuine Porto Rican 1901: 3).

¹⁵ They published the petitions as *La cuestión tabaquera* in 1885.

¹⁶ The first two, of the three-member-commission composed of Mateo Rucabado, Marcelino Solá and Evaristo San Miguel, were highly respected tobacco men (Ceballos Malavé 1989–1990: 181–91; Coll y Toste 1921: 57–8; Torres Grillo 1965: 58–9).

¹⁷ I have used the term Americanization rather than denationalization since the

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