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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 Puerto Rican tobacco industry experienced a profound transformation between the middle of the nineteenth century and the U.S. invasion in 1898; its change can be explained according to three factors. First, growers started to harvest a leaf that more resembled Cuban leaf for cigars than the one used for cut tobacco or handcrafted into rolls to be consumed by chewing. Second, factories relying on wage labor replaced small artisanal shops operated by independent cigar or cigarette makers. This industrial capacity was not export oriented, thus contributing to the substitution of Havana cigars and Cuban cigarettes with domestic ones. Third, the development of an entrepreneurial class in tobacco manufacture came to a halt as a consequence of the invasion. At the turn of the century, the American Tobacco Company, the “trust,” bought into the most technologically sophisticated tobacco manufacturing sector, machine-made cigarettes, and, soon after, independent cigar manufacturers faced stiff competition when the trust attempted to monopolize the trade.

[Key words: tobacco, cigar-makers, capitalism, Puerto Rico, manufacture, agriculture]
The most reputed tobacco growing district of Cuba, Vuelta Abajo, became a major theater of operations during the 1897 and 1898 campaigns of the struggle for Cuban independence (1895–1898). The conflict dislocated production and relocation policies of the Spanish regime severely constrained the time that growers and work hands could dedicate to the plantations (González Fernández 1996: 310–2). At the end of the war, large areas of the heavy and sandy clay soils were barren and laid fallow (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 improve the markets and international reputation of their leaf. According to the author of the authoritative 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 surveyed Puerto Rico for their newspapers, for business opportunities, and for possible 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 Cayey.
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 British merchants habitually bought Havana cigars from the onset of the century (Gottesegen 1940: 140–1; Ortiz 1947: 307–8). In Spain itself, the king in 1817 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 hand-rolled Havana cigars to be truly exceptional. “How Havana tobacco embarked upon its conquest of the world” 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 more.
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 to sticks, which in turn, hung from the ceiling of the building (Aguayo 1876: 64–5). This harvesting technique, dominant in the early nineteenth century, started to give way to what domestic growers, as well as those in other latitudes, called the Cuban 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 plant down in pairs, known as mancuernas, which were immediately classified as wrapper or filler tobacco. Each plant went through two to four such cuttings. The pairs, 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. Figure 2 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). The differences between the two techniques affected the distribution of space and the internal structure of the curing barns.

By 1888 the men and women from the highlands had gained considerable experience.
Small Cuban shops or buckeyes, known locally as *chincharas*, 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 1992: 133). Vuelta Abajo growers felt threatened enough, when Puerto Rican leaf showed up in Cuba itself, to address the issue in writing (Memoria sobre 1877; Villa 1876). Furthermore, the scarcity and high prices commanded by Cuban leaf out of Havana by the end of the war induced the Spanish tobacco monopoly to employ an inexpensive Puerto Rican leaf called boliche in the manufacture of cigarettes (Delgado y Martín 1892: 64–5).

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

Data from Aguayo 1884: 19 and Hitchcock 1898: 18
The most common cigar shape, the *breva*, began to be complemented by other shapes, *vitolas* in tobacco parlance, such as *regalías* and *británicas* and others who consciously imitated Cuban vitolas, particularly 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 house (Villar, Lanza y Cª. 1922).

Although the diffusion of the Havana craft stimulated the Puerto Rican industry, it was not enough by itself because indigenous circumstances had to be favorable. The second economic change refers to domestic conditions prior to 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 suggests that the 1880s and early 1890s were years of contracting or slow expanding leaf exports. That is, the growth of domestic manufacture coincided with the period of declining leaf exports (1880–1894). It is likely that growers, merchants, and others who consciously imitated Cuban vitolas, particularly in the...
Rucabado y Portela established La Colectiva in San Juan at the end of the war in 1898. The outcome of the war and the new status of Puerto Rico as a U.S. territory affected the timing for the establishment of the factory. On the one hand, the partners knew that they would not be able to return to their homeland, so they decided to enter the latter market. La Colectiva, together with the two original partnerships, was the only domestic firm to cross the threshold into the machine-made commodity until the end of the century.

Since 1865 the Rucabado brothers, their relatives, and associates had been involved in the production of cigars, and their factory, La Ultramarina, was one of the well-known tobacco manufactory that provided cigars to the Royal Spanish house. As previously indicated, this factory appears in the literature from the early 1880s, when it was held by Portela and Lomba, an earlier partnership. When Portela y Cía was reorganized in 1899, the second partnership to constitute La Colectiva, owned La Ultramarina, a large and important factory that manufactured cigars.

The third partnership involved Rucabado y Cía, which was owned by Rucabado y Portela, a joint venture of two preexisting partnerships and Portela y Lomba. In 1898, the assets of Rucabado y Cía amounted to 470,634.46 pesos.12 Portela y Cía, which was reorganized in 1903, was located in the eastern Cordillera. They started La Flor de Cayey factory during the early 1890s, and in the 1890s, they were one of the most important firms in the island. They had a large and modern factory, and they were one of the few that were able to produce cigars in large quantities.

While the cigar business remained in the hands of the original partnerships, the cigarette business experienced a mechanization process that started with introduction shredding machines used to prepare the filler for cigarettes. Mechanical shredders, as the one 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 craftspeople. (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 owners as they 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, package the product" (Chandler 1977: 249). In consequence, mechanical rollers effectively marked the disappearance of hand-rollers after the 1880s in the U.S. and elsewhere several years later (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 against the wall, and powered by a hidden steam engine through a drive shaft that ran along the ceiling that was, in turn, connected to a number of belt-driven pulleys attached to each machine. The output of a single machine was impressive; by 1884 the Bonsack produced between 200 and 220 cigarettes per minute, which represented the work of 48 craftspeople but was manned by three persons (Tennant 1950: 18; Tilley 1948: 572–4).
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 presented with considerable experience in financing tobacco production.

As the artisanal shop gave way to the capitalist factory, the relations between those who stemmed tobacco leaf and those who crafted cigars and cigarettes experienced profound transformation. The ways in which they worked and perceived themselves and each other experienced deep modifications during the last quarter of the 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 capitalists in order to advance common economic interests. Their first documented activity as a group 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 retail operations were located.
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 economies in the cigarette business (U.S., Bureau of Corporations 1909: 180–93; Cox 1974: 188). Puerto Rico became the first ATC investment in the Caribbean, when it sent La Colectiva and La Internacional. The latter also manufactured cigars (León Paz 1900: 1826–1853; Portela v. The Porto Rican American Tobacco 1921: 110).

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. 201-203).

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 was to send them over to the Dominican Republic if the trust decided to venture there. The trust was not interested in the Dominican Republic, unless it were a part of the trust in the United States. It therefore dissolved La Colectiva and La Internacional. Fausto Rucabado and José Portela continued to work for PRATC for a few years. Luis Toro, the managing partner, became board member of the local subsidiary of the tobacco trust (Portela v. The Porto Rican American Tobacco 1921: 110).
trust for a share of the cigar market, albeit a minuscule one, they did not refrain from a long collaboration that ranged from selling tobacco that they grew to buying deshojado leaf on behalf of the trust in the Caguas area (Bunker 1981: 239).

Other local factories used the same path and opened offices and established branches in New York to be closer to their clients. Portela’s La Ultramarina survived the trust of 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 of Flor de Cayey in Pearl Street, Manhattan (Mateo Rucabado 1904: 34). Other marketing strategies proved to be the booths and medals obtained in exhibitions held in Buffalo, Chicago, and St. Louis by Infanzón and Rodríguez’s La Habanera between 1902 and 1905 (Puerto Rico Ilustrado 1939: 86). In summary, over half of the company 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 Tabacos, a 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 remainders of previous Rucabado partnerships. Refer to Muñoz Morales (1900a, 1900b).

13 After the war, Cuba enacted a tariff on leaf imports (Ramos Mattei 1974: 6).

14 The available documentation does not provide evidence that the contract ever came into effect. Apparently, it fell through, but Robert Graham aided their entry into 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 (Blanco Fernández 1930: 83–115; Malavé 1889–1900: 181–91; Coll y Toste 1921: 57–8; Torres Grillo 1965: 58–9).

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


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