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Reseña de "Havana and the Atlantic in the Sixteenth Century" de Alejandro de la Fuente, César García del Pino y Bernardo Iglesias Delgado
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India remained firmly opposed to its abolition despite the precedent of abolition by Mauritius. Land settlement schemes, seen by the planters as a replacement became an alternative: as Mangru points out, in an odd reversal after the end of indentureship in the 1930s, the planters supported return passages and India opposed it.

It is good to have these essays in book form. They might have been grouped slightly better: the one on the return passage entitlement appears after the essays on hook-swinging and wife murder rather than with the first two essays. Some might have been expanded without increasing the size of the book by cutting out introductions that become redundant when they are reprinted together. Given Mangru’s skill and scholarship one hopes that his next book will deal with the subject in a more comparative fashion or explore further his interest in cultural survival and adaptation.

Reference


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In his latest contribution to The University of North Carolina Press’s Envisioning Cuba series, University of Pittsburgh professor Alejandro de la Fuente moves backward in time from his study of race in the twentieth century (de la Fuente 2001) to address Havana during the sixteenth century. He details how Havana changed from a small town in 1550 to “an impregnable port city and one of the most important shipping and trading entrepôts of the Spanish Atlantic…” by 1610 (p. 6). De la Fuente examines this transformation, and argues that
viewing Havana merely as a service and military center undermines the complexity of the port city and its role in the early Atlantic world.

Nearly two decades ago, renowned historian of Cuba Louis A. Pérez, Jr. described Cuban historical research as “an uncertain pursuit,” noting the many difficulties in accessing archives and their materials including lack of “easy access[…]…travel to Cuba…” and “entry to record depositories…” (Pérez Jr. 1991:ix). Using a variety of primary sources, including a treasure trove of valuable Cuban archival materials including notarial, parish, town council and treasury records compiled with the assistance of César García del Pino and Bernardo Iglesias Delgado, de la Fuente reconstructs Havana’s place in the sixteenth-century Atlantic world from a local perspective. As he persuasively argues, a study based on these local sources produces a very different perspective than one reconstructed almost exclusively from imperial records housed in Spain. 

Havana and the Atlantic in the Sixteenth Century helps to close the historiographical gap of pre-eighteenth-century Cuba, adding to the few but notable works on this period (see, Wright 1916 and Marrero 1972-1979, for example) Equally important, this work gives further depth to understanding later periods in Cuban history found in existing studies of the eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century by Matt D. Childs (2006), María Elena Díaz (2001), Sherry Johnson (2001), Allan J. Kuethe (1986), and John Robert McNeill (1985), for example.

Founded around the time when Spanish attention began to shift from the island to the rich mainland with its Aztec and Incan empires’ vast mineral and demographic wealth, Havana’s geographic importance became evident as Spain transported New World treasure back to Europe. Stopping in Havana’s protected harbor on their way to and from the Caribbean and Spanish mainland became standard practice as early as 1532. This regular gathering of the fleet in Havana also attracted others, such as French corsair Jacques de Sorés who sacked and burned the port town in 1555, leaving its future in question. Spain had the foresight to see Havana’s value, however, and determined that additional fortifications and people were needed to keep the town secure. In the wake of the French attack Havana literally rose from the ashes, rebuilt by African slaves.

Although de la Fuente argues that Havana’s role in the Atlantic world was more than just a “service stations for the fleets, a ‘factory’ or a transient point in the Spanish system of communications and trade” (p. 7), he does not overlook these important functions. In Chapter 2, “The Port: Shipping and Trade,” he studies imports and exports to and from as well as through Havana to demonstrate that the port had strong ties to Europe, and the rest of Spanish America via inter-colonial trade, for example. He even extends the reach of the Atlantic world to include
Asia as he examines the various textiles including silk imported into Havana, stating that the “social significance of this fabric was clear” (p. 32). Another import which helped shape Havana’s early and future history were enslaved Africans, with an estimated 1,300-1,500 slaves brought to Havana in the 1590s alone. It was the slave trade, de la Fuente argues, that “made a singular contribution to the creation of the Atlantic port city of Havana. Through the slave trade the residents of Havana got closer to Africa and to the various peoples who lived on the continent” (p. 43). Chapter 3, “The Fleets and the Service Economy,” addresses Havana’s strategic geographic location and maritime legacy, noting Havana’s contribution to ship provisions and the importance of defenses for the important port. The city’s treasury received in excess of 21 million reales between 1572 and 1610 to pay for various military expenses, including construction of fortifications, supplies, and salaries, de la Fuente finds.

*Havana and the Atlantic in the Sixteenth Century*’s most valuable contributions are in later chapters when de la Fuente examines the “impact on local society and the opportunities and challenges it created for the various social groups that worked and lived in the city” (p. 7), particularly in chapters on Havana’s urban growth (Chapter 4), and Havana’s social structure including the role of slavery (Chapters 6 and 7). This detailed look into the sixteenth-century town presents a clear picture of the complex society that evolved from interactions between its many-layered functions as governmental center, military fortress, port, and home to an increasing number of immigrants from Europe, and forced migrants from Africa. “By 1610 between 7,000 and 10,000 people lived in the city and its enormous hinterland,” (p. 107), of whom approximately, one-half of were African slaves and their descendants. Local regulations controlled the lives of people of color, both slave and free, de la Fuente argues, and “contributed to the creation of a racial knowledge that would become one of the central traits of the Atlantic system and a defining element in Cuba’s history” (p. 180). Economics and gender also played a role in the Havana’s social stratification as well, de la Fuente notes.

For most scholars of Cuba, the idea that Havana was integrally linked with not only Europe, Spain in particular, but also the rest of Spanish America and beyond, is not new. This should not dissuade historians of Cuba, however, from consulting this work as it provides a glimpse into the historical roots of many problems, conflicts, and societal structures encountered during later centuries. This well-researched study draws on conclusions gleaned from thousands of database entries from notarial, town council, parish, and treasury records, and secondary research in no less than five languages, however, the addition of several later colonial
studies mentioned above which provide a natural counterpoint to de la Fuente’s work would enhance the otherwise broad bibliography. Scholars of the island will naturally find this work enlightening, although they may be left wondering why 1610 was chosen as the ending date for this study particularly considering the formal shift of the island’s capital to Havana in 1607. Nevertheless, Havana and the Atlantic in the Sixteenth Century should receive a far larger audience. Instructors of upper-division undergraduate or graduate history courses are particularly encouraged to consider using this work as a convincing and deeply-researched example of the economic and cultural interconnectedness of the Atlantic, particularly across national and imperial borders.

References