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Review/Reseña

Gillian McGillivray, *Blazing Cane: Sugar Communities, Class, and State Formation in Cuba, 1868-1959*. Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press, 2009.

Bringing Sugar Workers to Center Stage in Cuba History

Manuel Barcia

University of Leeds

Labor relations in pre-revolutionary Cuba have attracted the attention of scholars over the past years, probably as never before. These new works have attempted to fill out a gap and to rectify previously misguided assumptions about labor, class and racial relations in both Cuban cities and countryside. Robert J. Alexander's *A History of Organized Labor in Cuba* and Araceli Tinajero's *El Lector: A History of the Cigar Factory Reader* constitute two recent examples of this scholarly trend.¹ The title reviewed here, Gillian McGillivray's

¹ Robert J. Alexander, *A History of Organized Labor in Cuba* (New York: Greenwood Press, 2002) and Araceli Tinajero, *El lector de tabaquería: Historia de una tradición cubana* (Madrid: Verbum, 2007). Published in

Blazing Cane, is a new important addition to this emerging body of literature.

From page one of *Blazing Cane* McGillivray submerges us in a world of human hopes and anxieties, making this first and foremost a history of the people. Even though the book focuses on a period just short of a century, the author's comparative and interdisciplinary approaches keep the reader's interest while offering an analysis blessed by an impressive level of sophistication. The communities attached to three sugar mills (*centrales azucareras*), the Tuinicú near Sancti Spiritus and the Delicias and Chaparra near Holguín, provide the backdrop which the entire study is set against.

The book is organized around the idea of the political development of the sugar cane industry in Cuba and its labor relations from colonial times till the year Fidel Castro came to power. These political developments are expressed through systems of negotiation that McGillivray calls "compacts". The "colonial compact," that deals with the Spanish colonial period and the first US intervention period, concludes in 1902; the "patron's compact" extends from 1902 to 1932; and finally, the "populist compact" encompasses the period between 1933 and 1959.

Among the main contributions of this book are fresh discussions on the previously under-studied issue of political lobby groups in pre-1959 Cuba. Here McGillivray manages to trace the maneuvers of all major political parties—Liberals, Conservatives, Auténticos—and their respective contributions to a more class-based political arena and forms of governments. McGillivray also shows how the economic depression that began in 1929 transformed forever the existing relations between the different social classes. Eventually, as it happened almost elsewhere in the Americas at the time, a new populist era was ushered, in which nationalism had a central role. These new populist-nationalist policies, the author argues, constituted deterrence against foreign capitalist interests and thus had a positive impact among the Cuban working classes. Albeit sugar remains incessantly at the center of the book, a big historical lens provides the reader with a much more comprehensive

and rich perspective without leaving aside the examination of sugar mills, unions, etc.

McGillivray's research has been terrific. No doubt, she has made use of every piece of available information, sorting daunting methodological obstacles to put the story together. She has wisely combined archival documents, a considerable number of newspaper articles, and interviews, broadening her analysis and cementing her conclusions. Overall, *Blazing Cane* constitutes a courageous take on this aspect of the history of twentieth-century Cuba, through a combination of close-ups on specific sugar cane communities and a macro outlook over the economic and political development of the island to 1959. Ultimately, sugar workers time and again move to the center of her analysis and represent, undoubtedly, the real protagonists of this book.