

2011

Book Review: Seeds of Insurrection: Domination and Resistance on Western Cuban Plantations, 1808-1848, by Manuel Barcia

Matt D. Childs

University of South Carolina - Columbia, childsmid@mailbox.sc.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/hist_facpub



Part of the [History Commons](#)

Publication Info

Published in *New West Indian Guide*, ed. Rosemarijn Hoefte, Richard Price, Sally Price, Volume 85, Issue 3&4, 2011, pages 287-289.

This Book Review is brought to you by the History, Department of at Scholar Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of Scholar Commons. For more information, please contact digres@mailbox.sc.edu.

Seeds of Insurrection: Domination and Resistance on Western Cuban Plantations, 1808-1848. MANUEL BARCIA. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2008. xvi+ 211 pp. (Cloth US\$ 29.95)

MATT D. CHILDS
Department of History
University of South Carolina
Columbia SC 29208, U.S.A.
<childsm@mailbox.sc.edu>

Over the last twenty years a noticeable shift has been afoot in the temporal and thematic focus in Cuban historiography of the nineteenth century, and race relations and slavery in particular. Beginning in the 1990s and continuing until today, scholars have produced dozens of excellent studies as part of an ongoing commemoration of Cuba's 100-year anniversary of its struggle for independence. Taken together, these studies have changed our interpretation of the independence struggle by highlighting the central role played by slaves turned rebels and their claims to write themselves politically, culturally, and legally into the new nation state. Likewise, a similar historiographical transformation has more recently got underway with a marked attention to pre-1868 Cuban history. Scholars are moving away from economic interpretations of Cuban slavery with a focus on sugar and dependency in exchange for exploring the complexity and internal dynamics of what became Spain's ever-faithful island and most important colony in the nineteenth century. Manuel Barcia's highly readable and historiographically insightful *Seeds of Insurrection* brings new evidence to one of the most important topics in Cuban slave studies: resistance.

Drawing on sources mainly from the Archivo Nacional de Cuba (Havana), but also regional archives in Matanzas, Pinar del Rio, and Santiago, Barcia's study has two broad goals. The first is to analyze slave resistance beyond looking at rebellions and maroons alone; the second, and most important for charting new insights into slave historiography, is to examine the African origins of slaves as central to understanding their strategies of resistance. In taking on these two challenges, Barcia works primarily with criminal and judicial records that captured the transcribed (and often translated) thoughts, voices, and actions of Africans that got deposited as testimony in legal records. He recognizes the inherent challenges in working with such power-laden sources and is less concerned with what they reveal specifically from a factual and empirical perspective than with the stories, strategies, and patterns of resistance they document.

Barcia opens his book with a concise chapter entitled “The African Background of Cuban Slaves” to catalog the major African ethnic and cultural groups among the enslaved population, such as Congos, Gangas, Lucimis, and Carabalis. Subsequent chapters build on this discussion to show how certain political, social, and cultural practices such as military training, witchcraft, and even ridicule can be traced to an identifiable set of transferred African cultural grammars that developed in Cuba. In most cases of violent resistance, Barcia tends to argue for transplanted African cultural traits rather than practices that had to be “creolized” and modified to their Cuban surroundings. What is noteworthy in the findings is that he links the study of Cuban slavery ever more clearly to African history, rather than seeing resistance as simply opposition to racial enslavement. While discussing rebellions (Chapter 2) and marronage (Chapter 3), Barcia also criticizes Cuban historiography for paying what he regards as far too much attention to “heroic” resistance as a prism through which the 1959 Cuban Revolution has long been refracted.

After leveling his well-deserved criticism, Barcia turns to his antidote: day-to-day resistance. Building upon the 1980s methodological work of anthropologist James Scott and slave scholarship elsewhere in the Americas over the last thirty years, he documents how foot dragging, feigning illness, flight, dancing, suicide, and “even attending mass were acts of resistance” (p. 115). Continuing his thematic emphasis on day-to-day resistance and his methodological approach of focusing on Africans instead of slaves, he examines how Cuban-born Creoles and African-born *bozales* used the colonial legal framework as a strategy to escape enslavement. On the legal culture of slavery, he soundly reasons that because Creoles were more familiar with Spanish judicial institutions and slave laws, tended to be concentrated in urban centers, and had financial resources and associational ties to notaries, the African-born population was at a clear disadvantage in exercising legal rights.

Barcia’s emphasis on violent vs. nonviolent and African vs. Creole forms of resistance, which provides the interpretative scaffolding that cogently holds his study together, will certainly be familiar to scholars of Caribbean slavery. His study should be commended for placing Cuba within long-established and ongoing historiographical debates that make the contours of his argument informative for scholars who do not specialize in Cuban slavery. At times, however, he tends to cleave the divisions between Africans and Creoles and their respective strategies of resistance with greater precision than what the quantitative and qualitative evidence cuts. Barcia concludes that “manumission and *coartación* [slaves purchasing their own freedom] were viable legal channels for Creole and urban slaves, but for most African-born slaves – particularly those who worked long hours on remote sugar plantations – they were almost nonexistent possibilities. African-born slaves had no one to negotiate with and did not know what to negotiate in any case” (p. 132). The most exhaustive quantitative study done to date on *coartación*,

by the team of Laird Bergad, Fe Iglesias García, and María del Carmen Barcia, found that the urban African-born population not only participated frequently in the process, but actually outnumbered Creoles during the first half of the nineteenth century.¹ Similarly, while Creoles tended to be better equipped to navigate colonial Cuba's legal structure, Barcia does mention that the African-born population often brought cases and provided frequent testimony in judicial records. Courts routinely employed translators of various African languages and even "Less frequently, in dealing with non-Christian slaves, prosecutors compelled the slaves to swear by their own gods or to offer their African birth names" (p. 11). These points in no way call into question the major findings of the study, but only serve to qualify some of the overarching conclusions in favor of a more subtle division between African and Creole strategies of resistance.

Manuel Barcia's *Seeds of Insurrection* is a pioneering study in arguing for day-to-day resistance as the central feature of the Cuban slave experience. His attention to African cultural practices and experiences of the enslaved makes this a valuable contribution to the rapidly burgeoning literature of the African Diaspora. Scholars of Latin American and Caribbean slavery will need to make room on their bookshelves for this important volume and its findings will make for fruitful discussion in graduate seminars.

1. See Bergad, Iglesias Garcia & del Carmen Barcia 1995:122-42, esp. p. 132, figure 6.9.

REFERENCE

BERGAD, LAIRD W., FE IGLESIAS GARCIA & MARÍA DEL CARMEN BARCIA, 1995. *The Cuban Slave Market, 1790-1880*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.