

8-2001

Book Review: Changing History: Afro-Cuban Cabildos and the Societies of Color in the Nineteenth Century, by Philip A. Howard

Matt D. Childs

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

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



Part of the [History Commons](#)

Publication Info

Published in *Journal of Latin American Studies*, ed. Gareth A. Jones, Rory Miller, Fiona Macaulay, Volume 33, Issue 3, 2001, pages 659-660.

Childs, M. D. (2001). [Review of the book *Changing history: Afro-Cuban cabildos and the societies of color in the nineteenth century*, by P. A. Howard.] *Journal of Latin American Studies*, 33(3), 659-660.

© Journal of Latin American Studies, 2001, Cambridge University Press

<http://journals.cambridge.org/action/displayJournal?jid=LAS>

conflicts and themselves provide the grounds for new conflicts and negotiations between religious and kin groups.

The book is very insightful and brings together different levels of analysis. However, there is an area that has not been addressed. In the discussion of healing and religious pluralism I was left wondering how recent international aid programmes have shaped the transformation of the medical pluralism that Browdin describes. The book would have benefited from a discussion of how international health projects are 'localised' through local conflicts or maybe local solutions in this ever-changing medical pluralism process. However, this volume could become a classic in the medical anthropology field, and it is recommended to students and researchers in anthropology, history of medicine, public health and religion.

University of Cambridge,
Centre of Latin American Studies

VALENTINA NAPOLITANO

J. Lat. Amer. Stud. 33 (2001). DOI: 10.1017/S00222161001486172,
© 2001 Cambridge University Press

Philip A. Howard, *Changing History: Afro-Cuban Cabildos and Societies of Color in the Nineteenth Century* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1998), pp. xxii + 227, £27.95 hb.

A common feature of urban African Diaspora communities of Latin America was the formation of voluntary mutual aid societies. Historian Philip A. Howard presents the first book-length study in English of the Cuban *cabildos de nación* that based their membership on African ethnicity and language, and the more universal *sociedades de socorros mútuos* who extended participation to all Afro-Cubans. For their members these organisations provided such services as loans, artisanal apprenticeship, burial, education, housing, dances, fêtes, and even purchased the freedom of slaves. Building upon the work of Cuban scholars Fernando Ortiz, Lydia Cabrera, José Luciano Franco and Pedro Deschamps-Chapeaux, combined with new but limited archival research in Cuba and Spain, Howard examines how these associations functioned to improve the social, political and economic status of Afro-Cubans in the nineteenth century.

The thesis that unifies the eight chapters of *Changing History* is the development and articulation of what Howard labels a 'consciousness of kind' by the *cabildos* and the societies of colour through their common struggle against the oppression of a colonial slave society. Howard describes how the mutual aid societies preserved African cultural identities and protected members from the oppressive structures of Cuban society that mitigated, to a certain degree, differences of language, ethnicity and customs to discern the common problems all people of colour confronted on a daily basis. The narrative of the book is the transition from distinct identities rooted in Africa to the formation of what Howard labels a Pan-Afro-Cuban identity that shared similarities, yet important differences, with the Cuban population as a whole in their struggles to end Spanish colonialism throughout the nineteenth century.

Howard traces the development of a 'consciousness of kind' through political action by analysing the revolutionary activities of the *cabildos* and the societies of color. In chapter four 'Inventing a Political Culture', Howard documents convincingly through court records the central role of the *cabildos* in the Aponte Conspiracy of 1812 and the *La Escalera* conspiracy of 1843–44. On both

occasions, *cabildos* served to unite slaves and free people of colour to end slavery and Spanish colonialism by providing organisational centers for planning the rebellion, confirming Robert Paquette's suggestion in *Sugar is Made with Blood* (1988) that *cabildos* were often converted into 'political hothouses'. The second half of the book continues to focus on political activities of the societies of colour by examining their role in the Ten Years' War (1868–78), the *Guerra Chiquita* (1879–80) and the War for Independence (1895–98). As with earlier events, the Afro-Cuban societies participated in the struggle for Cuban liberation, but the author does not define clearly their specific roles. Howard provides the example of *El Liceo Artístico* based in Sancti-Spiritu to suggest that other mutual aid societies 'probably were ... centers of insurrectionist conspiracy' during the Ten Years War, but offers no evidence to substantiate the claim (p. 109). Instead, he sketches biographies of well-known rebel leaders such as Antonio Maceo, Flor Crombet and Guillermo Moncada to narrate the participation of Afro-Cubans in the struggle for independence, but their direct relationship to the mutual aid societies remains unclear.

Changing History provides a broad examination of the mutual aid societies, outlining their form and function over the course of the nineteenth century. Differences between individual *cabildos* and societies of colour are not examined in detail, minimising the ethnic, racial and cultural diversity of the Afro-Cuban experience in favour of general conclusions. For example, Howard relies heavily on studies of the *Sociedad Secreta Abakuá* to arrive at conclusions for the practices of all *cabildos*. The *Abakuá*, however, were far from representative as they allowed white members to join their society; thus raising the question how important was African ethnicity and race for the membership of mutual aid societies? Future research will determine if the general conclusions apply to all mutual aid societies, and how ethnic and cultural differences among Africans funnelled into the Atlantic slave trade as emphasised by Africanists John Thornton and Paul Lovejoy, influenced *cabildo* activities.

Apart from these shortcomings, only to be expected of a pioneering work that spans the entire nineteenth century, Howard's study of the Afro-Cuban mutual aid societies is a welcome contribution to the recent publication of several innovative books in English that examine slavery, racism and colonialism. *Changing History* will be required reading for historians interested in Cuba, and should find a wider audience among scholars of the African diaspora, comparative slavery and the emerging field of Atlantic History.

University of Texas at Austin

MATT D. CHILDS

J. Lat. Amer. Stud. 33 (2001). DOI: 10.1017/S00222161001496179,
© 2001 Cambridge University Press

Oscar Zanetti and Alejandro Garcia, *Sugar and Railroads: A Cuban History, 1837–1959* (Chapel Hill, NC, and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), pp. xxviii + 496, £45.50, £22.95 pb.

In 1825, the world's first railway line was opened in England between Stockton and Darlington. By providing fast, cheap transportation the coming of trains brought a rapid intensification and spread of industrialisation. Possibly more than any other single advance, steam locomotion stands as a symbol for the economic development that propelled a few select countries into international dominance in the course of the nineteenth century.