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Black Labor, White Sugar: Caribbean Braceros and their Struggle for Power in the Cuban Sugar Industry

By Philip A. Howard (2015) Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 324 pages.

ISBN: 978-0-8071-5952-1.

Philip A. Howard, currently Associate Professor of Latin American and Caribbean History at the University of Houston, is a recognized authority on Afro-Cuban history and, more generally, African influence in Latin America and the Caribbean. His first book, *Changing History: The Afro-Cuban Cabildos and Societies of Color in the Nineteenth Century* (1998) discussed Afro-Cuban benevolent societies. *Black Labor, White Sugar* also explores African influences on Cuba and analyzes braceros, or workers, principally from Haiti and Jamaica, who came to Cuba to work in the sugar industry. "From its beginnings in the colonial era," he asserts, "the cultivation of sugarcane in Cuba engendered immeasurable misery for the predominantly black labor force that cut, loaded, and hauled the tropical commodity" (1). That misery increased when, during the U.S. occupation of Cuba, sugar producers and refiners built technologically advanced sugar mills

and imported workers from other countries to create an ethnically diverse transnational labour force. Throughout the volume, the author pursues two lines of inquiry. He explores the oppressive organizations that dehumanized workers and the perilous conditions of life they faced in Cuba. However, he also emphasizes the agency of the workers, strategies they used to resist both sugar companies and xenophobic Cubans, and the development of a militant working-class consciousness.

Howard begins by analyzing the workers who moved from their countries to Cuba. Some of these workers remained in Cuba only for the sugar harvest, where others attempted to stay more permanently. Black Haitian and Jamaican workers migrated to Cuba for specific reasons, including to protest against "the structures, policies, and social arrangements that reduced these workers' socioeconomic opportunities and mobility at home" (22). The period the book covers was a moment of profound transformation for Cuba, which had very recently gained independence from Spain. Chronic labour shortages and the need among sugar producers and refiners for workers encouraged violations of the bans on black immigration. Additionally, sugar companies, owned by both Cubans and foreigners, attempted to replace as many black Cuban workers as they could with black Caribbean workers. Sugar company elites believed black Caribbeans were more tractable than black Cubans were. However, the companies never completely eliminated Cuban workers. As Howard notes, sugar companies became adept at using the different ethnicities of their workers to, at once, foster competition and antagonism and narrow the possibility of labour solidarity. He pays very careful attention to this theme throughout the book: how companies continually attempted to drive wedges between different groups of workers.

When Haitian and Jamaican workers arrived in Cuba, they found conditions

analogous to slavery. Furthermore, Cubans and North Americans "demonized the workers to a degree where their clothes, language, and skin color had transformed them into gangs of disfigured and terrifying monsters" (67). The sugar companies provided very little for workers and attempted to wring the maximum amount of labour out of them. This leads Howard to comment, on more than one occasion, that immigrants became victims of unmerciful exploitation. Given the appalling conditions of life for many *braceros*, this is an accurate assessment. In addition, many Cubans believed black Caribbean *braceros* were undesirable aliens who would compromise Cuban sovereignty. In a vicious cycle, the increasing numbers of black workers fueled racism and violence. Black workers, in other words, found themselves in an unenviable position: exploited by sugar companies and hated by many Cubans. They had very few friends to turn to and often found themselves mistreated by unscrupulous corporate officers, xenophobic officials, and angry Cuban citizens.

Importantly, the workers in this volume do not appear as helpless ciphers genuflecting before domineering corporations. Howard explore numerous strategies of resistance, including the creation of autonomous spaces, attempts to reconstitute a peasant lifestyle, social gatherings, mutual aid societies, and other means of contesting subordination. Interestingly, he discovers that Haitians and Jamaicans had different ways of contesting subordination. Jamaicans often adopted a strategically deferential style, an "ingenious method that masked the strong desire among Jamaican immigrants to improve their socioeconomic lives in Cuba and elsewhere in the Caribbean" (132). He accounts for this by asserting that some Jamaicans, given their experiences at home, arrived in Cuba "better suited to cope with the Cuban-constructed Jim Crow culture than the Haitians were" (133).

Howard also explores the development of a worker consciousness. Black *braceros* employed a "host of strategies to compel the owners and colonos to not only pay them their wages but also to improve work conditions" (135). These strategies included agricultural sabotage such as setting the cane fields on fire and collective organizing. Furthermore, Cuban and Spanish-born labour leaders, who were often swept up in anarcho-syndicalist ideas, played an important role in cultivating a militant worker's consciousness among Haitian and Jamaican immigrants. Although these labour leaders initially focused on Cuban workers, they quickly came to understand the importance of organizing Caribbean *braceros* and incorporating them into the labour movement. *Braceros* responded enthusiastically. In the face of such challenges, sugar companies resorted to tried-and-true tactics and attempted to sow the seeds of discord between workers of different nationalities and races. This time, however, such tactics were significantly less successful. Several strikes resulted in concessions to workers, but, in the end, the strikes barely improved the daily lives of the *braceros*. Howard, in his discussion of a militant consciousness, also considers Marcus Garvey's appeal to *braceros*. When Garvey discovered that his ideology did not appeal to Cubans, he "redirected his efforts toward mobilizing and organizing the tens of thousands of black Caribbean *braceros*" (169) who warmly received him.

The final chapter discusses some of the consequences of this new activism. The Cuban government, Howard asserts, "quickly took steps to prevent the workers' newfound activism by classifying them as illegal immigrants upon the completion of the *zafra* and their work contracts" (200). Cuban authorities began to stress Haitian and Jamaican criminality and portrayed the *braceros* as a danger to Cuba. Although these ideas had been heard before, they became much more pronounced in official

discourse. In addition, an “exaggerated assessment of the impact of black immigration on Cuban society persuaded the government to restrict the arrival of black immigrants and expel those already living there in order to take better care of its own rural workers” (225). When braceros returned to Haiti and Jamaica, they found conditions that mirrored the conditions in Cuba and eventually joined the trade workers’ movement.

Howard’s discussion of braceros in Cuba ends in the 1930s. However, the issues he explores—how societies treat guest workers, the tensions between internationalism and xenophobia, the role of nationalism in political debates, working-class consciousness, and strategies of exclusions—resonate today. Many countries continue to grapple with these questions and *Black Labor, White Sugar* will appeal to both scholars and anyone interested in these questions. In addition, this book will work well in graduate seminars on Latin American history, the history of race in the Americas, and immigration history.

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Métiers de la relation. Nouvelles logiques et nouvelles épreuves du travail

Dirigé par Marie-Chantal Doucet et Simon Viviers (2016) Québec: PUL, 203 pages.

ISBN: 978-2-7637-3060-8.

Ce volume, résultat du travail d’un collectif de 16 auteurs, dont la plupart proviennent de diverses universités canadiennes et européennes, est dirigé par Doucet et Viviers. D’entrée de jeu, ces derniers se réfèrent à l’expression « métiers relationnels » qu’ils définissent de la façon suivante: « une activité transdisciplinaire d’aide ou d’accompagnement de personnes en situation de vulnérabilité, que ce soit au travers de transactions adaptatives, émancipatrices ou encore d’une quête de sens » (p. 1). À

l’origine du projet, des préoccupations sur le contexte actuel des institutions induisant de profondes mutations dans les conditions d’exercice des professions des soins et de l’aide sociale. Ces mutations sont en lien avec les principes de la Nouvelle gestion publique (NGP) empruntés au secteur privé, à savoir, une « recherche d’efficacité et de productivité, fixation sur le mesurable et sur la reddition de comptes instrumentés » (p. 2). Ces mutations ayant un impact significatif sur le sens attribué au travail génèrent de la dissonance cognitive se traduisant par un malaise professionnel, une « souffrance identitaire de métier ». Cette dissonance cognitive résulte de « l’existence d’un écart entre le travail réel des professionnels et les prescriptions organisationnelles ». Les impératifs managériaux encadrant leur travail mettent à mal le sens attribué par les professionnels de la relation d’aide à leur activité, ainsi que la représentation du travail bien fait et du plaisir qui lui est associé. Au cœur de cette problématique, il y a cette donne: pour les professionnels de la relation d’aide, leur outil de travail, c’est eux, profession et personnalité étant étroitement liées. En plus de leur engagement personnel « envers » leur travail, le praticien s’engage « dans » un travail sur lui-même. Les nouvelles contraintes organisationnelles viennent bloquer la réalisation de soi dans le travail (cf. l’« activité empêchée » de Clot). Par ailleurs, certains éléments du métier de la relation d’aide cadrent difficilement avec les principes de la NGP, notamment la nécessaire et constante adaptation de la relation d’aide au client et à sa situation, l’importance de la collaboration de ce dernier, sans oublier que les résultats s’inscrivent dans la durée. Ce volume se veut une démarche de réflexion portant sur les « nouvelles conduites et les nouvelles épreuves du travail » des acteurs œuvrant dans des métiers relationnels et intervenant sur des problèmes sociaux et scolaires. Il comporte quatre parties: 1- logiques d’actions, contraintes et potentialités des