ECONOMY AND SOCIETY OF LATIN AMERICA

During the period 1870–1914, many regions of Latin America became fully integrated into the world economy. Exports of raw materials, including minerals, oil, food products, and fibers, bound Latin America to the industrialized nations. Latin American nations became dependent on the industrial world's manufactured goods, markets for the export of raw materials, transportation, and credit.

The development of these economies altered patterns of work in the areas they affected. In Cuba sugar plantations expanded production to supply the growing populations of Europe and North America. Although processing and transportation became mechanized, sugar planting and harvesting remained handwork. The first selection, taken from the transcription of an oral history of a runaway slave, reveals the social conditions among the workers on the Cuban sugar plantations after abolition of slavery in 1886. The Spanish government granted abolition after a violent upheaval in Cuba known as the Ten Years War (1868–1878) followed by intense pressure from foreign powers, especially Great Britain and the United States.

The second selection describes conditions on the henequen plantations of Yucatan. Demand for henequen (a cactus-like plant) fibers was directly related to the mechanization of agriculture in the United States. In 1878 Cyrus McCormick added a new knotting mechanism for grain binding to his mechanical reaper. The subsequent search for a strong binder twine led directly to henequen in Yucatan. McCormick imported hundreds of thousands of tons of henequen during the late 19th century. Exports from Yucatan increased from 40,000 bales in 1875 to 600,000 in 1910. In 1902, the same year that McCormick merged with other harvesting machine companies to form International Harvester, he also secretly negotiated lower prices for henequen with the governor of Yucatan in return for steady purchases from the governor's export companies. With that agreement, International Harvester established its "informal empire" in Yucatan. The company neither needed to own its own land nor produce henequen directly. Production was left in the hands of local landowners and merchants, who became fabulously wealthy and who also controlled the Yucatecan state government.

The expansion of henequen production also affected land tenure and labor relations. When henequen became king, new plantations absorbed Indian communal land and imposed on their workers a much stricter regime of work. Seedlings and young plants required constant attention until they matured in seven years and harvesting the leaves was done by hand. The need for labor on henequen left little time for traditional cultivation of the Mayan workers' plots of corn (*milpas*). Labor shortages also resulted in the importation of Yaqui Indians captured in Northern Mexico and Puerto Rican and Korean workers. But most of all, owners relied on the local Mayan *campesinos*, whether they wanted to work on the plantation or not.

PLANTATION LIFE IN CUBA AND YUCATAN

I. FORMER SLAVE'S LIFE ON A SUGAR PLANTATION AFTER ABOLITION: CUBA 1880s

After all this time in the forest I had become half savage. I didn't want to work anywhere, and I was afraid they would shut me up again. I knew quite well that slavery had not ended completely. A lot of people asked me what I was doing and where I came from. Sometimes I told them, 'My name is Stephen and I was a runaway slave.' Other times I said I had been working on a certain plantation and could not find my relations. I must have been about twenty at the time. This was before I came across my relations. That happened later.

Since I did not know anyone I walked from village to village for several months. I did not suffer from hunger because people gave me food. You only had to say you were out of work and someone would always help you out. But you can't carry on like that for ever. I began to realise that work had to be done in order to sleep in a barracoon [slave quarter] at least. By the time I decided to cut cane, I had already covered quite a bit of ground. I know all the part north of Las Villas well. It is the prettiest part of Cuba. That was where I started work.

The first plantation I worked on was called Purio. I turned up there one day in the rags I stood in and a hat I had collected on the way. I went in and asked the overseer if there was work for me. He said yes. I remember he was Spanish, with moustaches, and his name was Pepe. There were overseers in these parts until quite recently, the difference being that they didn't lay about them as they used to do under slavery. But they were men of the same breed, harsh, overbearing. There were still barracoons after Abolition, the same as before. Many of them were newly built of masonry, the old ones having collapsed under the rain and storms. The barracoon at Purio was strong and looked as if it had been recently completed. They told me to go and live there. I soon made myself at home, for it wasn't too bad. They had taken the bolts off the doors and the workers themselves had cut holes in the walls for ventilation. They no longer had to worry about escapes or anything like that, for the Negroes were free now, or so they said. But I could not help noticing that bad things still went on. There were bosses who still believed that the blacks were created for locks and bolts and whips, and treated them as before. It struck me that many Negroes did not know that things had changed, because they went on saying, 'Give me your blessing, my master.'

Those ones never left the plantation at all. I was different in that I disliked having anything to do with the whites. They believed they were the lords of cre-

ation. At Purio I lived alone most of the time. I might have a concubine from Easter to San Juan's day; but women have always been selfish, and there wasn't a Christian soul alive who could support a black woman in those days. Though I do say that women are the greatest thing there is. I was never short of a black woman to say, 'I want to live with you.'

The work was exhausting. You spent hours in the fields and it seemed as if the work would never end. It went on and on until you were worn out. The overseers were always bothering you. Any worker who knocked off for long was taken off the job. I worked from six in the morning. The early hour did not bother me since in the forest it had been impossible to sleep late because of the cocks crowing. There was a break at eleven for lunch, which had to be eaten in the workers' canteen, usually standing because of the crowd of people squashed in. At one everyone went back to the fields. This was the worst and hottest time. Work ended at six in the afternoon. Then I would take myself off to the river, bathe for a while and go back to get something to eat. I had to hurry because the kitchen did not work at night.

Food cost around six pesos a month. They gave good portions, but it never varied: rice with black or white beans, or chick peas and jerked beef.

The Negroes who worked at Purio had almost all been slaves; they were so used to the life in the barracoon they did not even go out to eat. When lunch-time came they shut themselves up in their rooms to eat and the same with dinner. They did not go out at night. They were afraid of people, and they said they would get lost if they did, they were convinced of this. I wasn't like that—if I got lost I always found myself again. When I think of the times I got lost in the forest and couldn't find a river!

On Sundays all the workers who wanted to could work overtime. This meant that instead of resting you went to the fields and cleared, cleaned or cut cane. Or if not that, you stayed in, cleaning out the troughs or scraping the boilers. This would only be in the morning. As there was nothing special to do that day, all the workers used to go and earn themselves extra money. Money is a very evil thing. A person who gets used to earning a lot is on the road to ruination. I earned the same as the rest. The pay worked out at around twenty-four pesos, including food. Some plantations paid twenty-five.

There were still plenty of taverns around to spend one's cash in. There were two or three at Purio. I used to go into them for a drink now and then, and I also went there if I wanted to buy something. To tell the truth, the taverns weren't very nice places. Almost every day fights would break out because of rivalries or jealousy over women. At night there were fiestas, and anyone who wanted could go. They were held in the mill compound. There was enough room to dance, and the Negroes themselves sang the rumbas. The fun was in dancing and shouting and drinking.

In those days you could get either permanent or temporary work on the plantations. Those employed on a permanent basis had to keep to a time-table. This way they would live in the barracoons and did not need to leave the plantations for anything. I preferred being a permanent worker myself, because the other life was too troublesome. A man who decided to freelance would simply go along to a cane-field and, according to the amount of cane there, agree on a price . . . Those freelance workers were very sharp. They could rest whenever they felt like it, get a drink of water, and even took their women along to the cane-fields to lie with them. . . . Then the overseer came back and, if he was satisfied, they would go off with their money to the towns to wait till the cane grew again. If their money ran out quickly, they would find some way of getting work on another plantation. They lived like tramps, bedding in the smaller rooms of the barracoons. They hardly ever took their women to their rooms, but used to see them at night because they were allowed out after a day's work.

With us fixed-rate workers things were different. We couldn't go out at night because at nine o'clock we had to be ready for the silence bell.

The barracoons were a bit damp, but all the same they were safer than the forest. There were no snakes and all the workers slept in hammocks which were very comfortable, and one could wrap up well in the cold. Many of the barracoons were made of sacking. The one tiresome thing about them was the fleas; they didn't hurt, but you had to be up all night scaring them off with Spanish broom, which gets rid of fleas and ticks.

At Purio, as on all plantations, there were Africans of various countries, but the Congolese were in the majority. It's not for nothing they call all the region in the north of Las Villas 'the Congo'. At that time there were Filipinos, Chinese, Canary Islanders, and an increasing number of Creoles there as well. They all worked on the cane, clearing the ground with spades and machetes and earthing up. Earthing up means ploughing with a bullock and a tree-trunk on a chain to turn over the soil, just as under slavery.

Relations between the groups remained unchanged. The Filipinos were as criminal as before. The Canary Islanders did not speak; the only thing that existed for them was work, and they were as arrogant as ever. They took against me because I wouldn't make friends with them. One had to be careful of the Islanders, because they knew a lot of magic and they would do anyone a bad turn. I think they earned more than the Negroes, although they always used to say that everyone earned the same amount.

[Relations with Women and Children]

I felt better then than I do now. I had my youth. Now I still have my concubine from time to time, but it is not the same. A woman is a wonderful thing. Women, to tell the truth, are what I have got most pleasure from in my life. In the old days, when I was at Purio, I used to get up and go to the village on Sundays, always in the afternoons so as not to miss the morning's overtime, and sometimes I found myself a woman before even reaching the village.

This thing of going to the cane-fields to screw was a common practice, the people made use of the wagon track between the mill and the cane-fields. In those days you grabbed any woman and took her into the cane. There wasn't all the courtship there is now. If a woman went with a man she knew she would have to get down on her back. . . .

Casual relationships were more convenient. The women were free and they didn't have to get along with their parents. They worked in the fields, helping in the hoeing and sowing, and they went with a man when they felt like it. The easy-going fellows always went in for this kind of arrangement, one woman one day,

other woman the next. I think this is the better way myself. I stayed and didn't marry till I was old; I was a bachelor in many places. I knew women of all colours, proud women and kind ones.

If I count up all the women I had it seems that I must have had any number of children, but the strange thing is that I never knew of a single one. At least, none of the women who lived with me in the barracoon ever had any. The others, the women I took into the woods, used to come and say 'This boy is yours,' but how could you ever be certain with them? Besides, children were a big problem in those days. You couldn't educate them because there weren't any schools like there are now.

Little boys . . . were brought up wild and uneducated. The only thing they were taught was raising vegetables and hoeing; but no learning. They were often beaten, and if they went on being naughty they were made to kneel on grains of rice or corn. A whipping was the most common punishment. The parents came and then the boy was beaten with a birch or piece of braided rope until the blood ran. The cane was a green switch which never broke even when it was wielded violently enough to flay the skin. I believe I had sons, maybe many or maybe not, but I don't think I would ever have punished them like that.

Children were always playing truant. They would come scavenging round the houses to get out of work, and they often used to hide to escape from punishments their parents threatened them with.

II. WORK ON THE HENEQUEN PLANTATIONS OF YUCATAN

The Yucatecans have a cruel proverb, *"Los Indios no oigan sino por las nalgas"* ("The Indians can hear only with their backs"). The Spanish half-breeds have taken a race once noble enough and broken them on the wheel of tyranny so brutal that the heart of them is dead. The relations between the two peoples is ostensibly that of master and servant; but Yucatan is rotten with a foul slavery—the fouler and blacker because of its hypocrisy and pretence.

The peonage system of Spanish America, as specious and treacherous a plan as was ever devised for race-degradation, is that by which a farm labourer is legally bound to work for the land-owner, if in debt to him, until that debt is paid. Nothing could sound fairer: nothing could lend itself better to the blackest abuse. In Yucatan every Indian peon is in debt to his Yucatecan master. Why? Because every Indian is a spendthrift? Not at all; but because the master's interest is to get him and keep him in debt. This is done in two ways. The plantation-slave must buy the necessaries of his humble life at the plantation store, where care is taken to charge such prices as are beyond his humble earnings of sixpence a day. Thus he is always in debt to the farm; and if an Indian is discovered to be scraping together the few dollars he owes, the books of the hacienda are "cooked"—yes, deliberately "cooked"—and when he presents himself before the magistrate to pay his debt, say, of twenty dollars (£2) the haciendado can show scored against him a debt of fifty dollars. The Indian pleads he does not owe it. The haciendado-court smiles. The word of an Indian cannot prevail against the Señor's books, it murmurs sweetly, and back to his slave-work the miserable peon must go, first to be cruelly flogged to teach him that freedom is not for such as he, and that strugg may he will never escape the cruel master who under law as at present adm...tered in Yucatan has as complete a disposal of his body as one of the pigs which root around in the hacienda yard.

Henequen (Spanish *jeniquen* or *geniquen*) is a fibre commercially known as Sisal hemp, from the fact that it is obtained from a species of cactus, the *Agave Sisalensis*, first cultivated around the tiny port of Sisal in the Yucatan. The older Indian name for the plant is *Agave Ixtli*. From its fleshy leaves is crushed out a fine fibre which, from the fact that it resists damp better than ordinary hemp, is valuable for making ships' cables, but the real wealth-producing use of which is so bizarre that no one in a hundred guesses would hit on it. It is used in the myriad corn-binding machines in America and Canada. They cannot use wire, and cheap string is too easily broken. Henequen is at once strong enough and cheap enough. Hence the piles of money heaping up to the credit of Yutatecans in the banks of Merida. . . .

[At the mill] three or four Indians set to work to arrange the leaves so that their black-pointed ends are all in one direction. Next these thorny points are severed by a machete and in small bundles of six or eight the leaves are handed to men who are feeding a sliding belt-like platform about a yard wide, and on this they are conveyed to the machine. Before they enter its great blunt-toothed, gaping jaws, they are finally arranged, as the sliding belt goes its unending round, so that they do not enter more than one at a time. Woe betide the Indian who has the misfortune to get his fingers in these revolving jaws of the gigantic crusher, and many indeed are there fingerless, handless, and armless from this cause. . . .

For there is money for everyone who touches the magic fibre except the miserable Indian, by whose never-ending labours the purse-proud monopolists of the Peninsula are enabled to be ever adding to their ill-gotton gold. There are in Yucatan to-day some 400 henequen plantations of from 25 to 20,000 acres, making the total acreage under cultivation some 140,000 acres. The cost of production, including shipping expenses, export duties, etc., is now about 7 pesos (14s.) per 100 kilogrammes. The average market price of henequen is 28 pesos per 100 kilogrammes, so the planter gets a return of 400 per cent. All this is obviously only possible as long as he can get slave-labour and the hideous truth about the exploitation of the Mayans is kept dark. The Indian gets a wage of 50 centavos for cutting a thousand leaves, and if he is to earn this in a day he must work ten hours. Near the big towns, 75 centavos are paid, but practically, on many haciendas, it is so managed that the labour is paid for by his bare keep.

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. How did the Cuban plantation workers' conditions change (or stay the same) after the abolition of slavery in 1886?
2. Identify the different types of workers on the sugar plantation. What were the relations among them?
3. What do the narrator's attitudes toward women and children suggest about family life on the plantation?
4. What are the ties that bound the peon to the henequen hacienda in Yucatan?
5. When and why did henequen become valuable export product?
6. Describe the moral tone expressed by the Englishmen who wrote the document on Yucatan. What does this suggest about their attitudes toward Latin American civilization in general?