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Turning over a new leaf? The Havana cigar revisited

Discusses the historical and contemporary context of the crisis and reforms in the Cuban cigar sector. Author focuses on developments in the period 1992-94 when Cuba sank to, and pulled out of, the depths of the post-1989 crisis. This was when competition from the post-1992 boom of cigars made with Havana seed leaf grown outside Cuba became fierce. She concludes by considering scholarly interpretations of the 1990s agrarian reforms and emphasizes the need to foreground the interplay between external and internal factors.

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JEAN STUBBS

TURNING OVER A NEW LEAF?
THE HAVANA CIGAR REVISITED

The year 1993 marked the most significant turning point for Cuban agricultural policy since the sweeping agrarian reforms following the country's 1959 Revolution.¹ Most striking of all was the transformation of state farms into Basic Units of Cooperative Production (UBPC). As a result, the proportion of state-run agricultural land was radically reduced, from 75 percent in 1992 to 30 percent in 1995. Simultaneously, individual plots of land were given either for food self-sufficiency (*autoconsumo*) or smaller-scale cash crops such as tobacco. The restructuring of land tenure patterns and the regeneration of the peasantry (*recampezinación*) were seen as essential to stimulate production to meet the domestic food crisis and to boost quality export crops such as tobacco. The emphasis was on a combined package of market mechanisms and social regulation to increase yields, profitability, and food self-sufficiency. Production was now linked to a defined area of land (*la vinculación del hombre al area*), thereby reining in the "bigger is better" syndrome (*gigantomanía*) and simulating the conditions of the smallholder plot within larger productive forms.

This was a remarkable, if understated, policy switch from previous agrarian reforms, when early massive land appropriations were made by the state, and subsequently, in the late 1970s, the shrinking peasant sector was given a strong incentives package to move beyond the loosely organized Credit and Service

1. An earlier version of this article was presented at the 22nd Annual Conference of the Latin American Studies Association, Miami, Florida, March 2000. It forms part of wider research for a monograph on the island and offshore Havana cigar, 1868-1998. I am grateful for support and financial assistance from my own University of North London and from a British Academy small research grant in summer 1997, and for being awarded two Rockefeller Scholarships, one on the Caribbean 2000 program at the University of Puerto Rico and one at the Cuban Research Institute, Florida International University, in the spring and summer of 1998, as well as a Visiting Fellowship at the Department of Caribbean Studies, Royal Institute of Linguistics and Anthropology, Leiden, in autumn 1998. My thanks go to many colleagues for their support and encouragement and for generously contributing to my work in so many ways.

Cooperatives (CCS) to Agricultural Production Cooperatives (CPA). The ideology underpinning policy equated modernization with large, mechanized units of production and saw state farms as the superior form of production, cooperatives as next best, and smallholder peasant farming as backward, inefficient, and destined to disappear.

The tobacco sector arguably helped usher in this *volte face*. Tobacco, always an anomaly in revolutionary agrarian history, still accounted for some 70 percent in the smallholder sector and cooperative sector. In the latter, tobacco CPAs were among the first to experience problems with profitability and diseconomies of scale in the early 1980s and among the first to experience de-collectivization in the late 1980s.² Toward the end of the 1990s, the trend was quite clear and moving away from state farm to UBPC and, in 1998, in tobacco in particular, from CPA to CCS *fortalecido* (strengthened CCS).

What further differentiated cigar leaf from other tobacco and agricultural sectors as of 1994 was that it was a pioneer in attracting joint venture capital from overseas marketing companies, including crop pre-financing and dollar-incentive payments to growers and workers to improve quality and productivity. In the process of what was described as a “tobacco recuperation” program, yielding increased output of quality leaf, some of the old tobacco growers on family farms began to reap relative, and in some cases quite substantial, financial and other gains. Octogenarian Alejandro Robaina, whose farm is in the heartland of Pinar del Río’s famed Vuelta Abajo region, is one who now travels the world with his tobacco. Declared 1999 *Habano* man of the year, he netted US\$ 15,000 (a small fortune in Cuba) and has Vegas Robaina cigars, made from his leaf, named after him.

In effect, reforms in the cigar sector not only turned around a severe cigar crisis; they also pioneered wider policy responses to a crisis triggered by the post-1989 demise of the Eastern European socialist bloc, a crisis of dramatic proportions hitting all sectors of the economy. Such radical internal developments in cigar tobacco growing, I argue here, can only be understood in their wider context, both historical and contemporary. Thus, what follows provides first a brief historical backdrop and then a detailed account culled from specialized journalistic coverage of the crucial three-year period, 1992–94, when Cuba sank to, and pulled out of, the depths of its post-1989 crisis. This was precisely when competition from the post-1992 boom of what I have come to call the “offshore Havana cigar,” made with Havana seed leaf grown outside Cuba, became particularly fierce. I conclude by considering scholarly interpretations of the 1990s agrarian reforms in Cuba and emphasize the need to foreground the interplay between external and internal factors. Without reference to this interaction, I contend, it is impossible to understand how and why Cuba is “turning over a new leaf.”

2. In 1992, only 32 percent of tobacco land was in state hands, 22 percent in CPA, and 43 percent in CCS, leaving a residual 3 percent in other plots. By late 1996, the cooperative sector comprised 54 percent of tobacco land, but made up largely of UBPC (43 percent), with CPA trailing behind (11 percent).

THE OFFSHORE CONNECTION

Cuba's tobacco product par excellence, the cigar, considered since the mid-nineteenth century to be the best in the world, has been long imitated elsewhere.³ This was a process fostered by Cuba's own political history of nineteenth- and twentieth-century political upheavals and emigration, creating émigré communities and rival economies. The cigar was one of the products manufactured by the émigré Cubans thus creating an "offshore" next to the island Havana cigar, for non-U.S. and U.S. markets.

After the 1959 Revolution, émigré Cuban cigar tobacco communities grew up in Nicaragua-Honduras and Costa Rica, joining older ones in the Caribbean – Jamaica, Puerto Rico, and the Dominican Republic – Mexico and the United States – Florida, New Jersey, and Connecticut. Smaller manufacturers, dealers, growers and workers profited from the post-1959 internal economic upheaval in Cuba that was the product of insurrection, agrarian reform, and nationalization, plus the tight trade embargo that was the political response of the United States (and for a while the whole area) to the Cuban Revolution. While Eastern European bloc and Third World countries emerged as Havana cigar partners, Western European markets became a battleground for disputed Havana cigar brands.

Thirty years on, a new chapter opened when the demise of the Eastern European socialist bloc in 1989 signalled the end of Cuba's special trade and aid relationship. At the same time, the United States took steps to tighten and extra-territorialize the embargo in the form of the 1991 Torricelli and 1996 Helms-Burton Acts. As external geopolitical realities compounded internal weaknesses, both economic and political, the Cuban revolutionary government devised a short-, mid- and long-term structural adjustment strategy, courting non-U.S. trade and investment. The Havana cigar became a key player, as Cuban production plummeted, and battles fought in international courts over market brand names were but the more visible tip of a cigar war. A U.S. cigar revival was gaining momentum, involving the two U.S. cigar giants – Connecticut-based General Cigar and Consolidated Cigar in Fort Lauderdale – along with émigré Cuban tobacco interests, in the Dominican Republic especially, followed by Honduras, Nicaragua, Mexico, and Connecticut, in all-out competition with island Cuba.

This was the backdrop to the 1993 land reforms and the 1994 introduction of part-dollar payments as an incentives package for the tobacco sector, along with the setting up of a new holding company, Habanos S.A., to handle overseas marketing ventures. Both measures followed fast in the wake of two landmark "credit for tobacco swap" deals struck between the Cuban state tobacco enterprise, Cubatabaco, and its French and Spanish parastatal tobacco counterparts –

3. This I noted, but did not develop, in my monograph on nineteenth- and twentieth-century Cuban tobacco history, Stubbs 1985.

Société Nationale des Tabacs (SEITA) and Tabacalera Española S.A. A European cigar marketing joint venture was set up in Britain, with Hunters & Frankau. In 1996, a further venture was created with British-American Tobacco Company's Brazilian subsidiary, Souza Cruz, and Cuba was investing heavily in tobacco to help meet a world market demand in excess of supply. Heightened U.S.-European rivalry in the contemporary world of the Americas' cigar politics was mirrored by that within the Havana cigar universe, though there are signs this is already abating, national policies notwithstanding. In 1999, Tabacalera Española and SEITA formed Altadis (Alianza de Tabacos y Distribución), which bought 50 percent shares in Habanos S.A.; Tabacalera Española had earlier in the year bought Consolidated Cigar Co. and was thereby heavily involved in both the Havana and clone Havana cigar business.

THE CIGAR BOOM IN THE 1990S

The post-1992 U.S. hand-made cigar revival was well orchestrated. It has been attributed to aggressive marketing, more recently on internet, and most especially to the New York-based glossy *Cigar Aficionado*. Started in 1992, and by the late 1990s with a circulation of some half million, *Cigar Aficionado* caters primarily, though not exclusively, to an up-market, male, cigar smoking readership. Its features on cigar companies and personalities, combined with other accounts, provide an invaluable source of information on the years in which Cuba devised a strategy to rise out of the depths of its post-1989 crisis in a climate of fierce cigar competition.

In summer 1994, the French SEITA and the Spanish Tabacalera each agreed to finance inputs to help raise Cuban tobacco productivity – offsetting shortages of fuel, fertilizers, and pesticides that had most affected production (compounded by the 1993 hurricane in which about 60 percent of the tobacco crop was lost) – in exchange for guaranteed tobacco supplies.⁴ In 1992, Spain, Cuba's largest tobacco buyer, accounted for some 57 million cigars of Cuba's cigar exports.⁵ In 1994, the figure had dropped to 27 million cigars.

France was the second largest market after Spain. Tobacco was France's second main import from Cuba, after sugar, and has been since pre-Revolutionary days. However, disputed brands represented 53 percent of Cuba's cigar exports to France. This explains the importance attached to a July 1992 Paris court ruling to the effect that Montecristo, Partagás, H. Upmann, and Por Larrañaga belonged not to the Cuban state but to a Curaçao-based subsidiary of the U.S. Company Cuban Cigar

4. *Cuba Business*, July-August/September 1994.

5. Spain had not always figured so prominently. In 1961, political tensions between Spain and Cuba were at a height and for a whole year Spain refused to import tobacco, until the new Cuban government paid compensation to Spanish owners of tobacco firms expropriated after the Revolution. Following negotiations, a compromise was reached and Cuban exports to Spain were resumed.

Brands, which had bought the brands in 1976 and 1977 from the original owners who had left Cuba after 1959. Cuban Cigar Brands then sold to Tabacalera, which inherited the lawsuit. The brand names continued to be Tabacalera property and a restraining order was served on Cubatabaco to prevent sales in Spain and France.⁶

The 1994 Tabacalera deal was crucial in ending a long-smouldering dispute. Since early 1993, Cubatabaco had been attempting to shake Tabacalera's hold over a total of nine famous Havana cigar brands bought from their former owners on Cuba's behalf. In late 1990, incoming Tabacalera general manager Germán Calvillo went back on Tabacalera's agreement to act as intermediary in purchasing the brands. In April 1993, Cubatabaco ceded ownership of trademarks but also announced a marketing offensive in Spain involving an end of leaf tobacco sales to Tabacalera. This led to the virtual disappearance of Cuban cigars from the Spanish market, though Cuba's export revenues were also hit as unfavorable weather caused multi-million dollar damage in prime tobacco areas already affected by fuel, pesticide and fertilizer shortages. The 1994 agreement with Tabacalera outlined a twenty-year cooperation framework. Recognizing Cuba's crucial supply shortages, Tabacalera provided up to US\$ 25 million a year in gasoline, pesticides, fertilizer, and water pumps to resource-starved Cuban tobacco growers to help increase production. In return, Tabacalera would be buying 70 to 80 percent Cuban leaf and 40 percent Cuban cigars, and would have first preference in the event of a Cuban shortfall in meeting market demand. By 1996 Tabacalera expected to be selling 36 million Cuban cigars.⁷

The gravity of the Cuban situation at the time should not be underestimated. In the 1980s, Cuba exported some 120 million cigars a year, 90 percent of which were handmade. In 1990 exports were down to 80 million, 75 percent of them handmade; in 1991, 77 million; in 1992, 67 million; in 1993, 57 million, while the world demand for quality Cuban cigars could easily top 100 million. (This figure excluded the U.S. market, although it was estimated that some six to eight million cigars a year were taken in illegally.) In 1993, tobacco planting covered only one third of the projected acreage. Then, internal measures fast ensued for a "tobacco recuperation" program, and, in October, Habanos S.A. was set up as the international marketing company for Cuban cigars in all international markets except France, where it continued to be Cubatabaco. By 1994 cigar sales were up 26 percent over 1993, and the cigar recovery was being attributed to giving priority to production and the agreement with Tabacalera. Given the serious deterioration of production, Cuban Minister of Agriculture Alfredo Jordan in November announced a US\$ 3.5 million dollar allocation for part-payment to farmers, workers, and managers in tobacco agriculture, industry, distribution, and marketing. "Rapid tobacco recuperation is vital for the country to acquire the foreign exchange it needs," Minister Jordan declared.⁸

6. *Economist Intelligence Report*, 4, 1992.

7. *Washington Post*, June 17, 1994.

8. *Granma*, October 19, 1993.

This was the first such measure in Cuban agriculture, though similar payment was introduced in fisheries and electricity, and was already operative in tourism. The part-payment consisted of a voucher-incentive plan, with vouchers to purchase consumer goods in hard-currency stores. The aim was for a 1996 production back to the 1985 level of US\$ 115 million cigar exports, and a return to more direct links between retailer, manufacturer, and grower. Such links included new taste tests and the launch of new cigars. Hunters & Frankau, one-time owner of the hundred-and-fifty-year-old Havana H. Upmann factory (1922-38) and presently joint Anglo-Cuban London importer of Havana cigars, held taste tests with a social conscience. At one in September 1994, in Havana's Las Ruinas Restaurant, exclusive cigars were auctioned off at a value of US\$ 16,000, which was donated by H. Upmann to the González Coro Hospital in Havana. A second was a US\$ 1,000 per head meal in Paris for 160 persons (including U.S. citizens) selling cigars for a donation to UNICEF. By 1994, the Havana cigar was being sold in ninety countries, and *Casas del Habano* (Havana Cigar Houses) had been opened in various cities.

The Cohiba brand was especially suited to new lines. Cohiba was first made in 1968, in the newly created El Laguito factory, which was started in 1961 as a cigar-rolling school for women at a time when prestigious cigar rolling for export was the preserve of male rollers. It was originally made exclusively for President Fidel Castro (organized by a former bodyguard), and as the gift only he gave to visiting dignitaries. Made with the most select Vuelta Abajo leaf, since its commercialization in the early 1980s, it fast became the most coveted of Havana cigars. A new Cohiba Línea 1492 was presented in Seville in 1992, to mark the five hundred years of Columbus's discovery of Cuba with five cigars called Siglo I, Siglo II, Siglo III, Siglo IV, and Siglo V. When Cuba released five hundred limited edition humidors with fifty Línea 1492 cigars in autumn 1992, Hong Kong sold its eighty boxes in a few weeks; London's seventy boxes and Canada's twenty went within the month. London retailers said they could have sold twice the amount.⁹ In November 1993, a box of Cohiba cigars signed by President Castro sold at a London auction for £ 12,500, to raise money for medical aid to Cuba.¹⁰ In July 1994, news leaked that Pierre Cardin was planning to launch a new cigar called Maxim's.¹¹

A NEW EPICENTRE: THE DOMINICAN REPUBLIC

The 1994 SEITA and Tabacalera deals ended a European deadlock on Havana cigars that had existed since 1989 when Zino Davidoff broke with Cuba. From the mid-1960s, Davidoff had a whole range of Havana cigars bearing his name, making him the leading world supplier of hand-rolled Havanas. In 1989, com-

9. *Cigar Aficionado*, Spring 1993.

10. *CubaInfo* 5(15), 1993.

11. See Spanish press agency *EFE*, July 26, 1994.

plaining about the poor quality of the Cuban product, Davidoff ended his business partnership and switched to Dominican suppliers.

The Dominican connection was not fortuitous but part of the wider Cuban exile story. The Dominican Republic was not historically considered a producer of quality cigar leaf.¹² In 1962, however, an emigré Cuban tobacco agronomist, Napoleón Padilla, was part of the Washington reconstruction plan after the fall of Trujillo and helped found the Institute of Tobacco in Santiago de los Caballeros, in the Cibao (Padilla 1982, 1988). Thirty years later, when Cuba was facing the depths of its post-1989 crisis and dislocation, long years of major investments and effort in the Cibao were bearing quality Havana seed leaf and cigar. The full story involved not only disputed brands, legal and counterfeit, rolled by Cuban hands in exile, but also “Cuban seed” tobacco wrapper from Connecticut and Cameroon, and filler from Jamaica, Mexico, and Honduras, as well as the Dominican Republic.

Arturo Sosa, originally from the Canary Islands,¹³ was a producer of leaf filler in Remedios until 1960, left for Key West, built up a factory from scratch in Miami’s Little Havana, and wound up manufacturing cigars in the Dominican Republic rolled with Cameroon wrappers, exporting to Fox’s of London. Similarly, Cuban-born Benjamín Menéndez, whose family once owned H. Upmann factory and the Montecristo brand, left Cuba in 1959 and, as the mid-1990s vice-president of General Cigar’s operation in the Dominican Republic, was overseeing production of Partagás (with wrapper from Cameroon) and Macanudo (with Connecticut wrapper).

The Dominican Republic had become a home of operations to major cigar manufacturers outside of Cuba such as General Cigar and Consolidated Cigar, along with Arturo Fuente, Tabacos Dominicanos, and MATASA, among others. These produced a range of premium brands for the U.S. market, including Partagás, Macunado, H. Upmann, Arturo Fuente, and Davidoff. “For most, the journey was a simple choice based on business necessity – a place to make cigars after Fidel Castro took control of the Cuban cigar industry and the U.S. trade embargo closed the doors on Cuba in 1962.”¹⁴ The Quesada family of MATASA, which started out in Cuban tobacco in the 1880s, manufactured Fonseca, Romeo y Julieta, Licenciados, Sosa, Casa Blanca, José Benito, and the new Cubita. In the 1930s, one uncle brokered tobacco in the Dominican Republic, creating a permanent family foothold there. The Quesadas left Cuba in 1960, and, with a 1961 Royal Bank of Canada £200,000 loan (no collateral), they bought warehouse facilities in the Dominican Republic. In 1972 MATASA was born, and was producing some four million cigars in 1994.

12. While not considered quality leaf, the Dominican Republic does, however, have a strong tobacco history. See Baud 1996.

13. For the involvement of Canary Islander migration in Cuban tobacco, see López Isla 1998.

14. *Cigar Aficionado*, Autumn 1992:65.

Best known in the Dominican Republic was Carlos Fuente, of Arturo Fuente & Cía. Four Fuente factories of pre-Dominican times were damaged by fire: two in Tampa – one in 1921 and another in 1948 – one in Nicaragua in 1977, and one in Honduras in 1979. After a failed effort in Tampa in 1979, with Cuban and Vietnamese labor, Fuente almost abandoned the business:

“We were left with two choices. Sell out or go to a foreign country again”, said Fuente Sr.

Civil wars or political instability in Central America argued against returning there. Mexico’s strict foreign investment laws at the time dampened expectations of a reasonable profit. And Cuba was out of bounds. In a sense, the Dominican Republic was the only option left ... The government was seeking investment and jobs, and the rapidly expanding free trade zones offered a plentiful labor pool, a satisfactory infrastructure and duty-free import and export.¹⁵

In 1992 Fuente claimed to be the largest handmade cigar factory in the world, with four hundred rollers making 18 million cigars a year, including a new Hemingway brand. Fuente’s arrival coincided with a turning point in the Dominican cigar industry. In 1976, only five million cigars were exported to the United States; in 1979, that figure had risen to eleven million, a leading player being General Cigar. Between 1979 and 1981, when Consolidated Cigar moved its operations from the Canary Islands to La Romana under Tabacalera de García, exports tripled to 33 million. In 1990, 52 million cigars were shipped to the United States, accounting for 47 percent of the U.S. premium cigar market. All wrapper leaf was imported but filler was produced in the Cibao valley, where all manufacturers but Consolidated Cigar were located. The five major manufacturers represented contrasting worlds of the corporate, large, and small family firms – Consolidated Cigar, General Cigar, Fuente, MATASA, and Tabacos Dominicanos, where, since 1988, Davidoffs have been made. In 1992, the latter two each employed sixty to seventy rollers making some five million cigars (3.5 million of which were Davidoffs).

Nearly all export quality cigars were made in free-trade zones, which facilitated not only export of the finished cigar but also import and holding of leaf. In 1992, Consolidated employed four hundred workers producing H. Upmann, Henry Clay, Don Diego, Primo del Rey, and Royal Jamaica and had warehouses for twenty-four different tobacco leaves: filler from Brazil, Java, and the Dominican Republic; binder from Indonesia and Mexico; wrapper from Cameroon, Connecticut, Mexico, Nicaragua, and Brazil. In Santiago de Caballero’s free trade zone, General Cigar, in 1992, employing sixty sorters and leaf graders and 120 rollers, had warehouse inventories of leaf, including their famed Connecticut shade wrapper, valued at US\$ 20 million. By spring 1994, Fuente was looking to a breakthrough wrapper from his El Caribe farm.

15. *Cigar Aficionado*, Autumn 1992:65.

CONNECTICUT AND GENERAL CIGAR

In the 1990s, Northern Connecticut produced the U.S. cigar industry's most sought-after, and expensive, wrapper leaf for premium hand-rolled cigars, most of which was shipped down to the Dominican Republic for manufacture. The wrapper was grown in the Connecticut River valley. Tobacco farming in Connecticut dates back to the 1630s, but it was in the 1820s that cigar wrapper tobacco was developed, and by the 1920s, some 15,000 acres were under cultivation. This had dropped back to 1,300 acres in the 1980s, only 200 acres in 1992, with the overall decline in the cigar business, but it then began to creep back up with the cigar revival.

Cullbro Tobacco, a subsidiary of Cullbro Corporation, the parent company of General Cigar, was the leading producer of Connecticut wrapper. The fortunes of Cullbro and the Cullman factory date back to when Joseph Cullmann, the son of a German immigrant, started buying tobacco in Ohio in the latter part of the nineteenth century. In 1906-7, his son Joseph started to grow Cuban seed, brought from Havana. Connecticut tobacco acreage increased to a peak of 18,000 acres, and, with 1,800 acres of wrapper, Cullbro became one of the world's largest wrapper growers, on a par with American Sumatra. Grandson Edgar Cullman, today chairman of Cullbro, tells how he went to learn all about the cigar business with H. Anton Bock in New York in the 1940s. Moving into cigars, a family consortium bought up General Cigar in 1961 and the Temple Hall factory in Jamaica in 1969.¹⁶ Temple Hall was small but had made Macanudo and Montecristo during World War II, when Havana couldn't meet demand, and made export cigars for British American Tobacco. Their own brands were Temple Hall and Creme de Jamaica. With Connecticut wrapper and filler from Jamaica, the Dominican Republic, and Mexico, Cullbro launched a high-class advertising push for Macanudo as "the ultimate cigar."

In 1963-64, Ramón Cifuentes, owner of the Partagás brand who had left Cuba for the United States, went to work for General Cigar, as did Benjamín Menéndez and other Cubans. For the first ten years, Cifuentes thought Castro would be ousted and he would get his Havana factory back, but he was gradually becoming disillusioned. In the words of Edgar Cullman:

So, around 1974 I said, what do you think about selling the brand? That's not a bad idea, he said. So we discussed the selling of the brand, and I talked to his uncle, his brothers and his nephews in Spain. Then I had a talk with the people who worked at General Cigar. They said, you can't do that, we are going to do business with Castro tomorrow. We are going to recognize Cuba. And I said, it's not going to happen that fast. I made my bet that we could own the Partagás brand, make it a brand and nothing would happen in Cuba ...

16. For the Cuban tobacco history of Temple Hall, see Stubbs 1995.

The packaging is the same as in Cuba. We marketed it. We spent money advertising it with Ramón Cifuentes in the ads. It started to grow so fast that we had to decide whether we could expand in Jamaica or whether it was wise to have another place to make these cigars. At that point, we had our shade operation in Connecticut and our tobacco-sorting operation in the Dominican Republic. So we spoke to the officials in the Dominican Republic's free zone and they welcomed us.¹⁷

That was in the late 1970s. In February 1981 General Cigars also registered Cohiba and began marketing in a limited way. On this Cullbro was more cautious: "We have no big plans at the moment. We are looking over what we should do. We are very conscious of the fact that should Cuba open, we want to have a position with Cohiba. What that would be we are not sure today."¹⁸

CUBAN AMERICANS HEAD SOUTH

Meanwhile, in southern Miami's Little Havana, a few dozen immigrant Cuban rollers, one-time workers in top Havana factories, made about one million La Gloria Cubana, La Hoja Selecta, El Rico Habano, and Dos Gonzales cigars for Ernesto Carillo's El Crédito factory. Some were as inexpensive as one-third the price of cigars from well-known companies, but they were good, made from a mixture of Connecticut shade and a Sumatra-seed tobacco from Ecuador, with blends from Nicaragua, Brazil, and Mexico. The Carillo family had purchased El Crédito cigars in 1928 in San Antonio de los Baños, Cuba, and also owned several Pinar del Río tobacco plantations. The family left for Miami in 1959. In Miami and Tampa, Florida, as well as Union City, New Jersey, freshly rolled Cuban cigars could be picked up for US\$ 1 apiece. They were made in small sweatshops – "*chinchales*" in Spanish, known locally as buckeyes – where production depended on the availability of tobacco, the local smokers' market, and hiring and keeping cigar makers. In Little Havana, Arnaldo Laurencio employed about fifteen rollers making Antelo cigars, while four to six rollers could be found at Orlando Rodríguez's El Canelo.

Tampa, especially around Ybor City, was a cigar-industry ghost town.¹⁹ The few that remained were small, like the Vincent & Tampa Cigar Co. and Rodríguez and Menéndez. Tampa was home in name only to M & N Cigar's Cuesta-Rey brand – it was made exclusively by Tabacalera A. Fuente in the Dominican Republic, as was La Unica, while other M & N cigars were hand rolled at Nestor Placencia's factory in Honduras. M & N's founding Newman family, whose tobacco interests date back one hundred years and who bought

17. *Cigar Aficionado*, Autumn 1994:65-66.

18. *Cigar Aficionado*, Spring 1993:54.

19. For the Cuban tobacco history of Tampa and Ybor City, see Pérez 1978, Westfall 1987, Poyo 1989, and Méndez 1994.

Cuesta-Rey in 1958, struck a 1986 deal with Fuente: the Newmans would manufacture machine-made cigars for Fuente at the Tampa factory, and Fuente would make the hand-rolled Cuesta-Rey for Newman.

New Jersey's cigar community dates back to the 1920s and 1930s when American Tobacco shifted production from Cuba to Trenton and Union City. Decades later, they would relocate back to the Caribbean, but the Cuban community stayed behind making cigars for their own consumption. Small-scale examples were Berto Ale's La Isla and José Suarez's Boquilla. Rolando Reyes's Aliados (former Cuba Aliados of Sancti Spiritus subcontracted to Partagás, Por Larrañaga, El Rey del Mundo, and H. Upmann – Reyes left Cuba in 1968) was larger, with operations in Miami, the Dominican Republic, and Honduras – where tobacco was grown and labor was plentiful. According to the Cigar Association of America, more than forty million Honduran cigars were imported into the United States in 1992, up from 34 million in 1991. That put Honduras in solid second place, behind the Dominican Republic. After the Central American wars in the 1980s, cigar producers of the 1990s pushed ahead from the hot coastal plains of San Pedro Sula to the cool mountains of Santa Rosa de Copán and Danlí in the Nicaraguan border region. Among those who have been called the new tobacco “godfathers” are many Cubans:

Through these men, the shadow of Cuba and its legendary tobacco looms large in Honduras. They stand guard over the process and the tradition of making premium cigars. Antonio “Nico” Fernández (once manager of H. Upmann in Havana) and Nestor Placencia (whose family owned a 200-acre farm in Vuelta Abajo before leaving for Nicaragua) at Tabacos Placencia. Estelo Padrón and Frank Llana at Honduras American Tobacco. Julio Eiroa at Tabacos Rancho Jamaestran. José Quesada at U.S. Tobacco's Danlí operation known as CACSA, or Central American Cigars. Even the Honduran patriarch, Dr. Jorge Bueso, at Tabacos Flor de Copán, remembers Cuban tobacco as the standard, and today he extols the heritage of his Cuban seed leaves. Above all, these men know what they like: They like the cigars they make. They know how to make excellent products year after year. They are men who understand cigars ... “In the cigar industry, if you don't talk Cuban, no one believes you anyway,” says Dr. Bueso...

The Honduras-Cuban connection reads like a spy versus spy novel. Dr. Bueso tells the story of a high-ranking Cuban agricultural official, Jacinto Argudin, who sent a letter to him citing Honduras's history of high-quality tobacco and suggested he ask the new Cuban government for help in setting up a cigar tobacco operation. When no help was forthcoming, Argudin, who had been Dr. Bueso's college roommate at Louisiana State University in 1941, circumvented restrictions on the export of Cuban cigar tobacco seed and sent five pounds of seed through a diplomatic pouch to Honduras. That was the first Cuban seed planted in Central America, according to Dr. Bueso.²⁰

20. *Cigar Aficionado*, Spring 1993:82.

Honduran manufacturers bought wrapper tobacco from the northern Estelí and Jalapa area of Nicaragua, a war-ravaged part during the *contra* war. John Oliva, son of Cuban Angel Oliva, who ran the Oliva Tobacco Company in Danlí, entered into negotiations with the Tabacalera Independiente Nicaraguense S.A. (TAINSA) group, which included three former cooperatives formed under the Sandinista government and the cigar factory in Estelí, to begin farming in the Jalapa region again. But the tensions inevitably remained: the manager of Consolidated Cigar's Tabacos San Andrés factory in Danlí was Indalecio Rodríguez, former director of the *contra* organization, the Nicaraguan Democratic Front. Workers here were newcomers to cigar rolling, often young and women.

The Mexico connection was less developed and less fraught, yet in a not altogether dissimilar vein. San Andrés Valley is the home of Mexico's finest cigar tobacco and cigar exports. While tobacco has Mayan origins, legend has it that today's cigar business has been shaped by three revolutions: the Mexican Revolution of 1910-17 broke up many great cigar estates; the Sukarno takeover in Indonesia in 1949 caused Dutch cigar interests to move to Mexico with Sumatra seed; and the 1959 Cuban Revolution brought the Cubans. In fact, the Cubans in Mexico dated further back than that.²¹ "We learned a lot from the Cubans... A lot of them came to Veracruz and they helped change the way we presented cigars to the world", explained Jorge Ortiz Alvarez.²² Cuban-born Pedro Gómez, production manager of Matacapán Tabacos cigar factory, home of Te Amo cigar, started out as a roller in H. Upmann, in Havana, in the 1930s. He went to Spain, the Canary Islands, Tampa, the Dominican Republic, and finally Mexico: "His ports of call included only places where fine cigars were produced and savored as he worked to become a master in his own right. His passport reads like a guidebook to the history of cigars in the twentieth century."²³

BRAND WARS

In 1994, in Cuba, six key factories produced the quality export cigars: H. Upmann, Partagás, Romeo y Julieta, La Corona, El Laguito and El Rey del Mundo. El Laguito was the exception because it was set up after the Revolution. The other five were the traditional Havana factories of old. In the words of Romeo y Julieta manager José Fabelo:

Here in Havana we make our cigars not only with great skill but also with a lot of love. Other places may be able to make very good cigars, but nowhere has the tradition of Havana. Thus, we have the quality tobacco from Vuelta Abajo, which as a growing area can't be duplicated.²⁴

21. For the broader tobacco history, see González Sierra 1987.

22. *Cigar Aficionado*, Winter 1994:97.

23. *Cigar Aficionado*, Winter 1994:95.

24. *Cigar Aficionado*, Autumn 1994:81.

Each of the five Havana export factories could make four to five million cigars a year, yet in 1994 each was lamenting how production could be increased 50 to 100 percent to meet demand, if only more quality wrapper tobacco could be produced. Meanwhile, retailers round the world were facing supply shortfalls. Simon Chase, marketing director for Hunters & Frankau, declared:

We could have easily sold more than 3,000 boxes of Hoyo Double Coronas last year if we had had them... If everyone had Hoyo Double Coronas, it might be different, but I could pick up the phone today and sell 40,000 of them with very little trouble at all. And that might be to just one person.²⁵

Counterfeiting and brand wars were (and still are) major problems facing the industry of island Cuba, but cigar connoisseurs, especially in Europe, still say a Havana cigar is a Havana cigar, that what makes the difference is the Cuban-grown tobacco. They see the Dominican and other cigars as a different, lesser product, no matter how much the aggressive marketing of major U.S. and Cuban-American cigar companies has been striving to convince otherwise, as in the following *Cigar Aficionado* ads:

“When A Cigar Can Make You Forget Havana, That’s One-Upmanship” (Spring 1993).

“Before 1976, Ramón Allones cigars were made in Havana by Cuba’s most respected cigar-maker. Since 1978, they have been made by the same Cuban cigar-maker in the Dominican Republic [in their rich Cameroon wrapper leaves]” (Spring 1993).

“Guess Who’s Coming To Dinner? El Rey del Mundo, Coming To America In 1994” (Winter 1993/94).

“The Rebirth of A Legend, the new Romeo y Julieta Vintage Cigar: From its Cuban origins in 1875 to its heralded rebirth in the Dominican Republic, the Romeo y Julieta has always been the connoisseur’s choice” (Winter 1993/94).

“Cuba Aliados, Premium Quality Cuban Style Cigars: Rediscover the Art & Mystery of Pre-Embargo Havana” (Spring 1994).

“So good they should be illegal! Casa Blanca (Dominican Republic) Aliados and El Rey del Mundo (Honduras)” (Spring 1994).

25. *Cigar Aficionado*, Autumn 1994:81.

“Ever Wonder What The Great Cuban Cigar Makers Did After Leaving Cuba?” (Summer 1994).

“‘Fidel Castro thought I had left Cuba with only the clothes on my back. But my secrets were locked in my heart.’ Ramón Cifuentes and Partagás. The cigar that knew Cuban when” (Summer 1994).

Cigar Aficionado (Autumn 1992:143) commented:

Americans, of course, are not permitted legal access to the Cuban cigar, so only a percentage of U.S. smokers can decide for themselves which country makes their favorite cigar. But nothing lasts forever. The Cuban trade embargo will fall someday. The debate over where the best cigars are made will only get more intense. Cigar smokers will relish the search.

In Europe, *El Habano* was in business. After Spain and France, key 1992 Cuban cigar export markets were the United Kingdom (5 million), Switzerland (3 million), Belgium (1.2 million), and Germany (1 million). Montecristo was the number one selling cigar brand, accounting for some thirty million cigars, close to half all exports. But, in summer 1993, Tabacalera and Cubatabaco were locked in confidential talks about the future of Montecristo and other brands, including H. Upmann, Partagás, and La Gloria Cubana. In September 1991, Tabacalera had bought the world rights – excluding Cuba, the United States and the Dominican Republic – for US\$ 10 million from Cuban Cigar Brands, a partnership formed by the American tobacco giant Consolidated Cigar and Spain’s Internacional Cifuentes. Court cases in Spain and France subsequently supported Tabacalera’s ownership of the brands over Cuba. High stakes were created in the battle for Montecristo. Spain had the trademarks but didn’t have the cigars. Cuba had the cigars but couldn’t sell them because Spain had the trademarks. In 1993, the Cubans were not easily won over: “We are dealing with the problem at the moment,” maintained [then Cubatabaco director] Francisco Padrón:

Some things are more complicated than they seem ... If we cannot solve our problem with Tabacalera, we are going to launch a new brand name as a substitute for Montecristo. We would then withdraw the brand [Montecristo] from Spain. No problem.²⁶

26. *Cigar Aficionado*, Summer 1993:64.

A year previously, *Cigar Aficionado* had commented:

The big question is when the United States will begin trading with Cuba. Presumably, the big U.S. tobacco companies have their lawsuits ready for the first shipments of Cuban cigars to the States. One company based in New York even has the U.S. trademark for Cuba's most prestigious brand, Cohiba. "It is not that important the U.S. opens," said Cubatabaco's Padrón. "I will not take a single cigar from the European market and sell it to the States if it opens. I want to remain loyal to my customers in Europe."²⁷

Asking a tobacco grower in the Vuelta Abajo about such intricacies of international trade is generally answered by a shrug of the shoulders. Cubans say that in their plantations hatred cannot exist as long as the tobacco grows well. "It is just a pity that Americans cannot smoke Cuban cigars," said Rafael Guerra, assistant manager of El Laguito factory, where the famous Cohiba brand is made. "It is all a question of politics. I really hope that one day it all changes."²⁸

In spring 1994, Padrón declared to *Cigar Aficionado*: "I am not a politician. Things are moving. As José Martí said, 'the most important thing in politics is what you don't see.'"²⁹ In summer 1994, this was followed by an exclusive *Cigar Aficionado* interview with Fidel Castro, who talked about how eight years earlier he had given up smoking as a matter of principle on health grounds but who also extolled the virtues of the Havana cigar.

Over a million Cuban Americans, centered in the key electoral state of Florida and to a lesser extent New Jersey, formed a strong lobby in Washington. Many were diametrically opposed to both Castro and the Revolution – a "no deals with Castro" position. In his 1992 electoral Democrat bid, William Clinton courted the hitherto loyally Republican Cuban American National Foundation lobby, endorsing the Cuban Democracy Act, introducing extraterritoriality into the thirty-year-old U.S. trade embargo on Cuba. This created a foreign policy problem, as it was contested by major trading partners of both the U.S. and Cuba: Canada and Mexico (both in NAFTA) and Spain, France, and the United Kingdom, in the European Union. After the Cuban rafters crisis in the summer of 1994, the heat was on domestically in the United States over the Cuban immigration issue. When in 1996 the Helms-Burton bill, designed to tighten extraterritorial sanctions, became law overseas allies were further antagonized.

By no means all the U.S. and Cuban-American tobacco interests featured here shared the anti-Castro lobby. In the words of Lionel Melendi, manager of New York's De La Concha tobacco store, himself the grandson of a Cuban tobacco grower and cigar manufacturer: "If the embargo were ever lifted, there would be

27. *Cigar Aficionado*, Winter 1992-93:38-9.

28. *Cigar Aficionado*, Winter 1992-93:38-9.

29. *Cigar Aficionado*, Spring 1994:76.

a tremendous demand for Cuban cigars in the U.S. They'd be lined up around the block."³⁰ Cullbro/General Cigar chairman Edgar Cullman adopted a similar line:

I think that the taste of a Cuban cigar is a very rare taste, a beautiful taste, and people who like that taste will do anything to get a Cuban cigar ... such as bring them in illegally and smoke them illegally ... If we ever could find a way to deal with Cuba, it would be a great boon for the cigar business. But I'm not a politician ... There could very well be a revival of the cigar business when people want to taste Cuban tobacco ... I think [the end of the embargo] is going to come, but I don't know when ... The best-case scenario will be: the embargo ends and the American government says that until we can buy enough tobacco to satisfy the American demand by the U.S.-owned manufacturers to make whatever cigars they want with Cuban tobacco, it will hold up allowing Cuban cigars in. That was the understanding we had with the State Department way back in the 1970s when we thought we were going to have some rapprochement.³¹

Clearly, the best scenario for General Cigar would not be the best for Habanos S.A.

TURNING OVER A NEW LEAF?

Whether Cuba's ongoing reform process is conjunctural or structural – that is, driven by primarily external or internal considerations – has thus far been debated at the macro rather than a micro level, and often solely in the realm of policy. With some notable exceptions, Cuban scholars have tended to lend primacy to the crisis caused by the post-1989 demise of the Eastern European socialist bloc, while foreign scholars have argued the crisis of a whole economic model.

Where agriculture is concerned, the picture is less clear-cut. Key areas highlighted in the early 1990s reforms were the quest for greater food self-sufficiency (Deere 1993; Enriquez 1994; Roca 1994) and ecological agriculture (Levins 1990; Rosset & Benjamin 1992). From research conducted since in Cuba, we now have a clearer understanding of the CPA and UBPC, and issues of local autonomy, participation, land and market reforms.³² Scholars agree that non-state farms are performing better in volume and quality than state farms, and within non-state farms, CCS better than CPA and CPA better than UBPC. This is despite inverse unequal access to factors of production and other resources, with UBPC receiving more state-allocated inputs than CPA and CPA more than CCS.

30. *Cigar Aficionado*, Spring 1993:55.

31. *Cigar Aficionado*, Autumn 1994:69-71.

32. Deere & Meurs 1992; Deere, Meurs & Pérez 1992; Carriazo Moreno 1994; Deere, González & Pérez 1994; Deere et al. 1995; Deere 1995, 1996; Bu Wong 1996; Nova González 1996, 1997; Figueroa 1996, 1998; Pérez-Rojas, González Mastrapa & García Aguiar 1996, 1998a, 1998b; Valdés Paz 1997; Deere et al. 1998; Rodríguez Castellón 1999; Burchardt 2000; Cárdenas Toledo 2000.

Here certain departures come into play on how to interpret this. One study characterizes this as peasantization, depeasantization, repeasantization (Bryceson, Kay & Mooij 1999). Other authors conclude that post-1959 revolutionary policy has been a failure, because it was premised on the state farm as the ideal form of agricultural organization; their corollary argument is that a lessening of state intervention in the agricultural sector could bring about considerable improvements (Puerta & Alvarez 1993, Alvarez & Puerta 1994). In 1991 the CPA was still being described in Cuba as a "superior form of collective production" and the CCS as a "primary organization of a collective nature," backward and slow to adapt to modern technology; and yet the former was being out-performed by the latter. The creation of the UBPC in 1993, Alvarez and Puerta argue, is a massive turnaround in economic thinking and demonstrates that the Cuban leadership has finally come to terms with these realities. It not only denotes recognition of the failure of a policy implemented for more than three decades, it should also induce the leadership to extend the privatization process throughout the economy.

Likewise, certain conclusions have been drawn from foreign agribusiness investment. Thus the 1994 pre-financing agreements with Tabacalera and SEITA, while tying up a large part of Cuba's cigar leaf and cigar exports to Spain and France, are held to go a long way toward explaining the overall increased tobacco output from 25,000 metric tons in 1995 to 33,100 in 1996 and 50,000 in 1997, and the quadrupled manufacture of cigars from 60 million in 1995 to 193 million in 1996 and 250 million in 1997 (Fernández Mayo & Ross 1998).³³

As described in this paper, however, the situation in tobacco is complex and, if anything, demonstrates that no simplistic conclusions can, or should, be reached. This has been corroborated in case studies conducted in Cuba.³⁴ My own earlier studies of the tobacco sector in the 1970s and 1980s (Stubbs 1987, 1991, 1993a, 1993b; Stubbs & Alvarez 1987) homed in on internal factors such as crop specificity in tobacco history, land size, diseconomies of scale, household, and gender. My research in the tobacco areas of Vuelta Abajo and Vuelta Arriba in 1999 pointed to diverse experiences, but to an overall growing awareness of the possibilities and the pitfalls of both internal and overseas markets, as well as individual and collective autonomy, plus a desire to retain perceived social benefits. Concerns were expressed regarding the drive to meet unrealistically high tobacco harvest targets (some even likened this in kind to the 1970 drive for the ten million ton sugar harvest). In Vuelta Abajo, the push to tobacco monoculture was taking its toll on food self-sufficiency and contrasted markedly with the more mixed economy of Vuelta Arriba. One highly successful tobacco from Vuelta Arriba CPA is La Nueva Cuba,

33. It is unfortunate that tobacco was not included in a study of Cuba's current transition and Florida's agricultural economy (Alvarez & Messina 1993; Alvarez 1997; Ross & Fernández Mayo 1997).

34. Donéstevez Sánchez, Fajardo Nápoles & Figueras Matos 1996; Catá Guilarte 1998b; Echevarría León 1998; Pérez Rojas & Echevarría León 1998; Rojas Hernández 1999. New courses have been run to train tobacco agronomists, and new texts brought out: see Instituto de Investigaciones 1998.

in Cabaiguán, which has continued to grow in land area and membership, produces quality tobacco, is food self-sufficient and markets a surplus, and return profits are used for social betterment as well as re-investment in production. Even so, there, as elsewhere, questions are being raised concerning the impact of the 1990s reforms on social equity, household, and gender, all of which remain to be studied.

And yet, the fact is that the strategy of the 1990s agrarian reform dovetailed with the courting of non-U.S. investment, enabled island Cuba to ride an internal tobacco crisis of unprecedented proportions, in the process "turning over a new leaf." Both the output and quality of production and export increased, outstripping fierce overseas brand competition and helping subsidize other sectors of the economy and society. As a result, the "proud cigar band," to borrow the words of Fernando Ortiz (1995),³⁵ helped propel Cuba into the twenty-first century.

35. My research has led me to return to the thinking of Fernando Ortiz and develop a new Cuban counterpoint between the offshore and the island Havana cigar: *Recentring Tobacco in the Contrapunto: Reflections on two 1990s Cuban Revivals* – Fernando Ortiz and the Havana Cigar, forthcoming in: *Proceedings of Cuban Counterpoints: The Fernando Ortiz Symposium on Cuban Culture and History*, City University of New York.

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