REPORT: La configuración periodística del bandido en Cuba: batallas impresas (1878-1898)

The main objective of this research project was to take a deeper look at the modes of representation of banditry in the press of the period that followed the end of the Ten Year’s War (1878) up until Cuban independence (1898). I was able to consult a wide range of microfilmed newspapers along that period at the Biblioteca Nacional de España. Unfortunately, some of them that could have provided me with additional relevant data were illegible, or only a couple of pages remained from the original. Nevertheless, I gathered enough data for my researching purpose. Furthermore, I was able to get a key book on the subject, quite current (2003) but unfortunately out-of-print (not even available through Interlibrary Loan): La protesta rural en Cuba. Resistencia cotidiana, bandolerismo y revolución (1878-1902) by Imilcy Balboa Navarro. Patiently, besides Balboa’s work, I went through most of the main newspapers, from both sides, the officialist press defending the interests of the colonial metropolis and the liberal press that supported the independent movement. This support was not straight forward due to censorship, but it was not at all obscure or cryptic in terms of representation, especially in the particular cases of La Lucha y La Discusión.

One key point that led me to this research was the October 17th 1879 ruling, which extended to Cuba a previous law (January 8th 1877) that enforced the repression of banditry in Spain. This ruling on behalf of metropolitan interests is explained by the subsequent war named Guerra Chiquita (Little War), a new independence revolt that would last just one year (Aug 1879- Sept 1880). The liberal newspaper La Discusión published (Nov 16th 1879) a public announcement, signed by colonial governor Emilio Calleja that basically declared the
implementation of martial law and offered a term of ten days in which “los rebeldes que verifiquen su submisión a las Autoridades legítimamente costituidas, quedaran exentos de toda pena”. Anyways, the October 17th 1879 ruling pursued to justify not political but rather martial repression under the term “bandolerismo”, likening independent efforts (General Ramón Leocadio Bonachea, Limbano Rodríguez) to well known bandits such as Manuel García, “el Rey de los campos” in order to discredit the independent movement as well as implementing martial courts (that literally implied easy and quick life/death sentences). Its main supporter was the General Captain Camilo Bonachea, also known as The Butcher of Cuba.

The depiction of bandoleros in the liberal press was a literary effort loaded of epithets that portrayed bandits in a gentle manner, especially during the peak of epidemic banditry (1889-1895):

“Pero se conoce que Caballero y sus hijos son astutos, porque le jugaron la cabeza a la Guardia Civil” (La Discusión . Sept 13th 1889)

“Atento y gustoso nos recibió (...) Su fisonomía es simpática y revela inteligencia y astucia. La franqueza es condición de su carácter” (La Discusión . Sept 20th 1889 –on incarcerated bandit Joaquin Alemán)

Even mere (and famous) bandits, but with strong social ties to the community were well depicted in those pages: Matagás was renowned for not hurting women (La Lucha Sept 6th 1890) or it was reported that Mirabal looked like an “hacendado” in his manners and dress code (La Discusión , 21 Feb 1890).

On the other hand, we found La Iberia, the soundest officialist newspaper, along el Diario de la Marina:

“¿Quién ha protegido al criminal? ¿Quién lo ha amparado? ¿Quién ha contribuido á que se evada ó permanezca escondido? Alguna persona honrada. Y claro está, que en un país en
donde las personas honradas amparan a los criminales, la Policía, entregada á sus propias fuerzas, á poco que haga se coloca muy por encima de la de Inglaterra, que no se agita en el vacío como la nuestra (...) La Discusión hace de todo esto un chiste y El Español lo celebra” (La Iberia. July 6th 1889).

The same newspaper celebrated the death of supposed bandits in its pages (see Dec 20th 1890 – “Muerte de un bandido”) as well as El Diario de la Marina considered anyone not publicly affiliated to the metropolis a mere criminal especially many independence fighters (i.e Carlos Agüero Fundora, Ramón Leocadio Bonachea, Limbano Sánchez) that also found in banditry methods to survive due to necessity.

Both factions, officialist and liberal accomplished their role in different ways: last ones found in the use of gentle epithets depicting bandits (especially those that Eric Hobswan would name as “social bandits”) a way to skip censorship, while the journalistic representatives of the colonial metropolis took vehemence as their main tool to fight the independent aspirations, in a last and desperate attempt of prevalence over one of the last remaining colonies.