Galván, Javier A.
Sugar and Slavery: the Bittersweet Chapter in the 19th Century Cuba, 1817-1886
Revista de Humanidades: Tecnológico de Monterrey, núm. 16, 2004, pp. 211-231
Instituto Tecnológico y de Estudios Superiores de Monterrey
Monterrey, México

Available in: http://www.redalyc.org/articulo.oa?id=38401609
Sugar and Slavery: the Bittersweet Chapter in the 19th Century Cuba, 1817 - 1886

Javier A. Galván
Santa Ana College

Sugar cultivation and slavery were closely linked in 19th century Cuba. The transition from slavery to freedom on this Caribbean island can be best viewed as a gradual process along a legal and political continuum. However, it is crucial to explain why slavery ended in Cuba in 1886, precisely at a time when the sugar industry was still going strong. The thesis proposed here is that there was a combination of domestic and external factors that finally brought about the abolition of slavery. The availability of contract workers allowed Cuban planters to invest their capital not in slaves but in other sectors of the sugar industry, such as technological innovations. An analysis of the international arena also reveals how Spain continued to receive mounting pressure from the United States and Britain to formally end the slave trade and eventually take definitive steps towards legal emancipation. In 1886, Spain finally abolished the moribund institution of slavery that had lasted over three hundred years in Cuba.
I. Introduction

The history of Cuba in the XIX century is the history of sugar. The cultivation of this crop has historically affected every aspect of Cuban society, and although less dynamic than before, it continues to be a driving force on the island's economy. During the colonial period, it became a Spanish sugar colony and this industry affected class structures, land tenure forms, patterns of investment, commerce, but most importantly for the purpose of this paper, it affected labor relations. At the time, the sugar economy was pervasive in most components of Cuban life. In addition, this crop placed Cuba in an important position in the world's economy.

However, the role of Cuba in the international sugar market in the nineteenth century was both a blessing and a curse. The opportunities offered by world markets made the expansion of sugar production profitable, but it was the availability of slaves that made it possible. The sugar industry can be analyzed from an economic perspective, a technological approach to agriculture, or an emphasis on the labor force. Due to the fact that Cuba was comparatively a latecomer to the sugar industry and that it relied heavily on slave labor, the slave trade flourished on the island during the nineteenth century. By 1850, Cuba had approximately 1,500 sugar estates in operation, and it was one of the largest sugar producers in the world, with the United States as its major importer.

Table 1 below offers a general view of how Cuba ranked among the top five sugar producers in the global market during the mid-1800s:

Table 1. World Sugar Production in 1856 (Adapted from Hugh Thomas, 1971, p. 126)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SUGAR</th>
<th>Total production (in tons)</th>
<th>% of total world production</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cuba</td>
<td>359,397</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>British West Indies</td>
<td>147,911</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>U.S. (Louisiana)</td>
<td>132,468</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brazil</td>
<td>105,603</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>French West Indies</td>
<td>110,000</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
By the early 1800s, sugar became increasingly important to the Cuban economy. However, the sugar industry required the use of cheap labor, which came in the form of African slaves. Consequently, the study of slavery in Cuba cannot be separated from the analysis of the sugar industry, and in turn it must be studied within the framework of the economic prevalence of this crop on the world market.

This paper covers the economic, social, and political aspects of the sugar industry in a general way, but the emphasis is placed on the slave labor force used in the 19th century. More specifically, the focus of this research is between 1817 and 1886. The first date marks the first time Spain signed an international agreement with England to end slavery in Cuba. The latter date is the year in which slavery actually ended on the island. Thus, this research covers the struggle to make the transition from slavery to free labor in a period of almost seventy years (1817-1886). While there were a small number of slaves who worked as domestic servants in the households of La Habana, this article is focused on the study of sugar plantations, where the large majority of the slave population was concentrated in Cuba. The purpose of this paper is to present evidence that the abolition of slavery in Cuba was a painfully slow transition, and it was delayed for as long as legally possible by Cuban sugar planters and Spanish merchants.

The thesis proposed here is that there was a combination of domestic and external factors that finally brought about the abolition of slavery in Cuba. Moreover, the transition from slavery to freedom on this Caribbean island can be best viewed as a gradual process along a legal and political continuum. The laws that restricted slavery between 1817-1886 were approved and amended when it was convenient for political, social, and economic reasons. In fact, a general review of the legal code shows that Spain took several attempts to officially abolish the slave trade in Cuba. However, even the laws that claimed abolition were retracted and amended to reduce their immediate effect.

It is important to analyze how Cuba emerged as a powerful sugar producer and to study slavery within the larger Latin American context. Before the 1800s, Saint Domingue (Haiti) had the most dynamic
and efficient sugar plantation system in the world. However, the former French colony experienced a bloody revolt in 1789, which destroyed its economy. The leaders of the rebellion were black slaves in search of both independence and the complete abolition of slavery. The results of the rebellion included over 1,000 plantations destroyed, over 10,000 slaves dead, and at least 2,000 whites killed. Sugar production dropped dramatically, and within five years Haiti’s capacity to compete in the world market was almost nonexistent. Spain quickly took advantage of Haiti’s disappearance as a sugar producer, and it removed all taxes on exported sugar from Cuba to Europe. All of a sudden, Cuban sugar growers found themselves in a privileged position: there was an expanded international sugar market and rising prices. By 1810, Cuba had doubled its sugar production to satisfy the needs of the European markets. By 1840, Cuba was the richest colony in the Spanish Crown. The need for a larger labor force also altered the demographics of the island at a rapid pace. Slave imports increased dramatically during the 1800s. While there are many similarities between the island and the rest of colonial Spanish America, there are also crucial differences that help explain why Cuba was the last country to abolish slavery in Spanish America in 1886. However, before discussing the abolitionist attempts in Cuba, it is necessary to be aware of the magnitude of slavery on the island compared to that of other colonies in the Spanish Empire during the colonial period.

II. The numbers game: how many slaves?

Several researchers have attempted to come up with the number of slaves that were brought to the Americas during the Atlantic slave trade, but there is no clear consensus on the exact number. Perhaps nobody really knows. Phillip Curtin carried out one of the most comprehensive studies (from a quantitative perspective) in the field. He is considered to be instrumental in determining the number of slaves that were transported during the Atlantic slave trade. According to Curtin, about 13 million slaves were brought to the Americas, and Spain transported about 1.5 million of them to its colonial territories. The first Spanish asiento (Royal permit) to deliver slaves to the American colonies was granted in 1513, and Cuba was the last location in Spanish America to free slaves (1886). During this period of almost
four hundred years, Cuba received roughly 702,000 slaves, as shown in table number 2 below.

Table 2. Estimated Geographical Distribution of Slave Imports into Spanish America during the Entire Slave Period (1513-1886) (Adapted from Curtin, 1976, p. 46).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Region</th>
<th>Slaves</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cuba</td>
<td>702,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Puerto Rico</td>
<td>77,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mexico</td>
<td>200,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Venezuela</td>
<td>121,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peru</td>
<td>95,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>La Plata and Bolivia</td>
<td>100,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chile</td>
<td>6,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Santo Domingo</td>
<td>30,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Colombia, Panama &amp; Ecuador</td>
<td>200,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Central America</td>
<td>21,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>1,552,000</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2 shows that Cuba received about fifty percent of all the slaves brought to the Spanish colonies during the colonial period (702,000 out of 1.5 million). Perhaps this number is greater in Cuba because it was the last country in Spanish America to abolish the trade. In fact, table 3 below reveals that slave imports were still very high in the late 1800s, even decades after most of the Latin American nations were independent and had already legally abolished slavery. However, the case of Cuba during the 1800s is unique because it represents the extended control of the Spanish Empire over its remaining colonies in the Americas. In Cuba, Spain developed a profitable plantation economy that lingered almost until the end of the XIX Century. However, Spain was also facing international pressures towards abolishing the slave trade. Great Britain abolished its own slave trade in 1807, and from that date on it embarked on a world-wide crusade to eliminate the transportation of slaves and eventually convince individual countries to abolish slavery altogether. Nevertheless, 78% of the slaves transported to Cuba were brought precisely during the
XIX century. To illustrate this point, the data in table 3 below reveals the increase and decrease in the slave trade for specific decades.

Table 3. Estimated Slave Imports to Cuba, 1811-1870. (Adapted from Curtin, 1976, p. 234.)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Decade</th>
<th>Number of Slaves</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1811-1820</td>
<td>79,900</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1821-1830</td>
<td>112,500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1831-1840</td>
<td>126,100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1841-1850</td>
<td>47,600</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1851-1860</td>
<td>123,300</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1861-1870</td>
<td>61,500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>550,000</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It is important to note that the arrival of slaves increased dramatically between 1821 and 1840, despite the fact that Spain had just signed an international agreement with England to end slavery in its territories in 1817. However, Cuba was in a period of economic growth based on sugar exports, which demanded the use of slave labor. On the island, only a small number of slaves worked as urban house servants; most of them were sent to sugar plantations. In fact, more than half of the slaves brought to Cuba during the XIX century came during the twenty years (1821-1840) that followed the agreement with Great Britain. The increase in slave imports occurred despite the fact that Spain signed a second treaty with Great Britain in 1835 to halt slave trade to the Caribbean. According to Manuel Moreno Fraginals, these decades were the most intensive in the contraband of slaves, and the reason why there are any estimates at all on the number of slaves is because the British had representatives in La Havana who were keeping some of the records, whenever possible.

The decade between 1850-1860 shows another increase in the slave trade (123,000 slaves), and these dates coincide with the arrival of the railroads to Cuba. By the 1850s, the main phase of Cuban railroad construction was almost accomplished. This was a period that was parallel to the so-called “third sugar revolution” because the island was producing large amounts of sugar for the world markets. It produced 322,000 tons of sugar in 1853 and 392,000 tons by 1855. However, the name “third revolution” is certainly misleading. The term makes
reference to a significant increase of sugar production, but it did not necessarily create an ideological or social convulsion that would justify calling it a “revolution” in the true sense of the word.

The last decade, between 1861-1870, shown in table 3 above, reveals a decrease in the number of imported slaves (only 61,500). This figure might be the result of both ethical and economic factors, which pressured Spain to reduce slave imports. It could also be related to the external pressure from the Abolition Law that ended slavery in the United States in April of 1865. Spain could not necessarily ethically conceive being the only country left (other than Brazil) to maintain the moribund institution of slavery. In addition, as Laird W. Bergad proposes, the main reason for the decline in slave imports was due to the high prices of slaves during the 1860s and 1870s. In addition, the international market started to experience a decline in sugar prices during the 1870s, and this continued for another two decades. While the slave trade continued on the island until 1886, it is important to place Cuba in a comparative context with other Latin American nations and their laws related to slavery at the time.

III. Abolition in Latin America: A comparative perspective

In the 1970s, there were several attempts to carry out comprehensive and comparative studies of slavery to cover all the eighteen countries of Spanish America. The wealth of sources currently available in the literature indicates that wide comparative research on slavery is no longer in the infant stage. Researchers approach slavery from multiple vantage points. Some of these studies take into account the social, geographical, and economic conditions that allowed slavery to flourish for over three hundred years. The usefulness of comparative approaches is that they reveal the position that Cuba had in relation to the rest of the Spanish colonies.

Leslie B. Rout analyzed the social, racial, and political aspects of the slave trade. He provides both a general picture of slavery and also studies the details of regional areas. For example, he discusses the overall slave trade and gives a detailed account of the Spanish asiento system and its regional implications in a number of countries such as Argentina, Venezuela and, of course, Cuba. Rout also tackles the complex topic of the social castas (Racial castes and their
stratification system) and its intricate web of rules and regulations. One of the strengths of his book is that he carefully points out the social inconsistencies within the castas system itself, in which slaves were placed at the bottom of the social scale. Finally, Rout goes even further to include a detailed discussion of a number of slave rebellions, the role of black soldiers in the wars of independence, and the possibilities of manumission (when a slave owner granted freedom to a single individual) that slaves had at their disposal within the regional legal systems. Rout's work is thoroughly researched, using mostly primary documents and sources, and he carefully points out the inherent problems of methodology when historians attempt to count the number of slaves brought to the Americas.11

One of the most salient conclusions that Rout presents is related to the pervasive and often misguided notion that slaves had better treatment under the Spanish system. Such a notion is still used today to claim that Spanish slavery was more humane than its British, French, and Dutch counterparts. Rout presents more than enough evidence to conclude that the so-called Spanish benevolence towards slaves is essentially historical fiction.12

During the 1970s, Hebe Clementi also carried out comparative studies of slavery in Latin America.13 The author's main purpose was to discuss the factors that contributed to the abolition of slavery throughout Spanish America. He dedicates a special chapter to Cuba in which he mentions some of the early attempts to limit the slave trade on the island. Clementi states that the Spanish Crown wanted to make slavery the foundation of plantation agriculture, based on the French model of Santo Domingo in the Dominican Republic. Clementi thoroughly discusses three crucial events that affected the course of action towards complete emancipation on the island: the petitions by the Cuban oligarchy to delay abolition, the Moret Law of 1870 (which granted freedom to children and elderly slaves), and the effect of the U.S. abolition law of 1862. The main argument by most groups opposed to abolition in Cuba was that complete emancipation would hurt the local economy.

With the exception of Brazil and Cuba, Clementi concludes that a number of social and economic conditions permitted the abolition of slavery throughout Latin America in the early 1800s. First of all, the
slaves were less than 10 percent of the total population. Second, slavery was no longer of productive value. Finally, he also mentions that manumission was very gradual, and it usually expanded over a period of several decades. Moreover, abolition was only really reached when the governments provided monetary compensation for the slave owners to set their slaves free.\(^14\)

While the comparative approach provides a wide point of view of the slave trade and the struggle to obtain emancipation in Latin America, it is also imperative to analyze the Cuban conditions of slavery and its effects on its local society, politics, and economy. It is often claimed that the interrelationship that exists between slavery and the sugar industry in Cuba provides a considerable body of knowledge that should be explored in further detail.

IV. Sugar mills, technology, and the labor force

Perhaps the most comprehensive study of the sugar mills and their relation to overall Cuban history has been the work of Manuel Moreno Fraginals.\(^14\) The author needs three separate volumes to undertake the huge task of relating the sugar economy to other historical factors such as Cuban society, politics, technology, religion and, of course, the slave labor force that made it all possible.

Using mostly primary sources, Moreno traces the operations of the small sugar mills (trapiches) and also the agricultural estates that elevated the processing of sugar to a larger scale in the period between 1740 and 1860. The second volume includes an economic approach to the international sugar industry and the crucial historical position of Cuba in relation to Spain, England, and the United States as its export partners.

The technological advances used in the production of sugar in Cuba, such as the railroad and the steam engine, changed the sugar industry tremendously. For example, the arrival of the steam engine made the sugar mills more effective, and they could produce greater quantities of sugar at a faster pace. Thus, the traditional forms of sugar production in small ingenios (sugar mills) became obsolete. The arrival of the railroad changed the fact that now sugar could be produced at a distance farther away and also be delivered to the ports to be exported more efficiently. In addition, Oscar Zanetti suggests that the
main purpose in developing a railroad in Cuba was not to satisfy the internal needs of the nation but to stimulate and facilitate the bonds between local sugar producers and their external markets. Consequently, railroads did not make Cuba modern or developed. Instead, they were used to serve the specific interests of the sugar plantations.¹⁶

The arrival of technological advances offers an apparent paradox: if modernization improved the sugar industry, why would slaves still be crucial for the next twenty years? While the use of machinery (steam engine and railroads) made the sugar manufacturing more efficient, it actually needed more sugar to be grown in the fields. As a result, the tobacco and coffee producers in the central part of the island started to be replaced by sugar plantations. According to official estimates, over 38,000 slaves were transferred from cafetasles (coffee plantations) to sugar estates before 1843.¹⁷ Moreover, the sugar industry became subdivided into two separate compartments: sugar production in the fields and sugar processing in the new and improved ingenios. However, all the work in the fields still had to be performed by slave labor. According to Laird W. Bergad, despite the high costs of slaves during the 1860s and 1870s, sugar production still remained extremely profitable.¹⁸ Moreno mentions that the sugar mills always included a combination of paid workers and slaves. Eventually, there was a gradual transition from the slave labor force to free workers earning a salary.

One of the theses proposed by Moreno is that the use of slave labor was incompatible with the applications of advanced technology. His argument is that the use of steam engines and the arrival of railroads made the production of sugar cane more efficient, and it was a necessary move to keep the Cuban industry competitive in the world markets. An immediate tangible result was that most plantation owners needed higher amounts of capital to invest in their ingenios. As a result, the small trechiches (small sugar mills in Cuba) could no longer compete with the larger, efficient, and well-funded sugar estates. Moreno proposes that the use of new technology and the influx of foreign capital started to develop a new kind of labor system in which slaves were not so crucial anymore. Instead, there was a transition to a more balanced number of slaves and free workers, and
this transition eventually provided the appropriate social environment for the complete abolition of slavery. However, Moreno does not really offer enough details nor does he give a convincing explanation as to why foreign investment made slave labor an irrelevant institution.

While Moreno’s claim (presented in 1976) certainly has cogency, more recent research has challenged this view and presented alternative explanations as to why slavery ended in Cuba at the time it did. Rebecca Scott has also studied the abolition of slavery on the Caribbean island and the transitional period from slavery to free labor by using well-known census materials and sources. Scott presents compelling evidence that Cuban slavery remained extremely vital precisely to the local economies that were more technologically sophisticated in terms of sugar production. Her interpretation suggests that slavery might have disintegrated from within Cuba, mostly due to economic mishandling and not necessarily due to the use of technology or foreign influence.

Fe Iglesias García presents yet another point of view to account for the end of slavery in Cuba at the precise time when it happened in 1886. He viewed the investment in slave labor as a system in which the plantation owners needed to tie up investment capital in slaves. If other salary workers could be brought in, then the plantation owners could use their capital to invest in other items that could increase the efficiency of their sugar mills. The importation of Chinese contract labor offers an example of the transition from slavery to free labor. Between 1853 and 1860, over 6,000 Chinese workers, or coolies, were brought to Cuba every year, for an approximate cumulative total of 60,000 of them. While these Asian workers were technically and legally free, their working conditions were deplorable, and they were often treated worse than African slaves. Plantation owners spent even less money on the upkeep of the Chinese workers than they did on the maintenance of slaves. Moreover, the arrival of the coolies created a salary scale that was lower than the wages paid to free blacks in Cuba. Most of the Chinese workers died on the island and hardly ever returned to their homeland. The ethnic composition of the labor force on the sugar plantations was beginning to change.
V. The legal abolition of slavery in Cuba: a gradual process, 1817-1886

Sugar and slavery have had a relationship in Cuba that has lasted several centuries, but this connection must be related to events on both sides of the Atlantic. In contrast to other countries in Latin America, Cuba never really obtained its independence from the Spanish Crown. Consequently, the course of abolition in Cuba was determined by Spain, which in turn was pressured by world events in Britain and the United States. If Cuba had been already an independent nation like the rest of the nations in Latin America, it is likely that the U.S. and Britain would have also pressured the island to take steps towards abolition. Such behavior would be consistent with Britain’s insistence that Brazil also offer emancipation to its slaves, since Brazil was infamous for being the last country in the Americas to abolish slavery in 1888.

The research carried out by Arthur F. Corwin is an informative account of how Spain procrastinated in the implementation of abolition laws that would officially end the slave trade to its colonies. This approach appears to be a contradiction, since Spain had been cooperating with international agreements to abolish slavery in its territories. As mentioned earlier, the first official attempt to end slavery in Cuba was the treaty that Spain signed with England in 1817, but it took almost seventy years for Spain to impose a final law to end the slave trade in 1886. Corwin narrates how Spain was able to delay, amend, and even revoke several legislative measures when it was convenient for economic, social, and even military motives. He also makes valuable links to events in Spain, Britain, Puerto Rico, and the United States. As a result, he offers a story of slavery in Cuba and all the players that had an interest in seeing it delayed for as long as possible. The main reason for this apparent contradiction seems to be economic. Spain was unable, and possibly unwilling, to reform the institution of slavery because the sugar production of Cuba was a plentiful source of tax revenue for its decaying world influence in the Americas. It represented one of the few remaining, yet moribund, attempts to extend its colonial power.

The controversial treaty of 1817 between Spain and Britain was supposed to officially end the slave trade to Cuba. Upon careful
examination of the language in the original document, it actually reveals that the king of Spain prohibited Spanish subjects to engage in the slave trade north of the Equator. While the discussion carried on about the application of the law in the territories south of the Equator, the effects of the agreement of 1817 were postponed until 1820. The result was a dramatic increase in the number of slaves that arrived to the island before the deadline in 1820. However, this is exactly the decade when Cuba was becoming a major player in the international sugar market, and the production of this crop relied heavily on slave labor. In fact, there were different groups on the island that were not in favor of abolition. The Creole elites, Spanish government officials, and Spanish merchants were all united in their defense of sugar and slavery, upon which rested prosperity, property, and privilege. All these groups believed that the Colonial system provided political stability and specific social privileges that could directly be transformed into economic benefits.

By 1835, it became apparent that neither Spain nor Britain could enforce the treaty against the slave trade. As a response, Spain enacted the “Law of Abolition and Repression of the Slave Trade” in 1845. It meant to provide for the confiscation of Spanish ships proven to be actively involved in the slave trade. The law intended to provide further details on the punishment for Spanish subjects if they were found guilty of engaging in this illegal trade. However, there were already visible signs that Cuba’s Creoles had specific interests that differed from those of the Spanish Treasury. Spanish intellectuals often supported an abolitionist movement, but the Creole sugar planters needed slavery for the sugar industry to survive. During this period, Cuban planters and merchants temporarily advocated the possible annexation of Cuba to the United States. In reality, however, not much changed in Cuba, because these laws could not be enforced. Instead, one of the results was that the price for slaves actually increased during this time.

The research on slave prices in Cuba during the colonial period is somewhat limited. Laird W. Bergad et al. present a complex quantitative study of Cuban slavery from 1790 to 1880. Their emphasis is on the demographic and economic analysis of the fluctuating price of slaves in the international arena. Their research is one of the most
ambitious statistical studies of the slave market in Cuba. Their work is thoroughly documented by using over 30,000 slave transactions in Havana, Santiago, and Cienfuegos. They converted their data into important instruments for the analysis of social, political, and economic history. Their information shows that, during the decade from 1851 to 1860, Cuba experienced a tremendous increase in the number of slaves that arrived to the island. These numbers were almost triple the ones for the previous decade. Moreover, the data from the 1850s also coincides with the attempts to bring alternative labor sources to Cuba, such as the 60,000 Chinese workers that came during the same period. The transition to contract labor was beginning to coexist with slavery.

As a result of mounting pressure from the international community (mainly Britain and the United States), Spain approved yet another royal decree in September of 1866, which was intended to remedy a loophole in their 1845 law against the sale of slaves. The previous law forbade the slave trade but made it illegal for government officials to carry out any investigations inside the plantations themselves. Therefore, no violations of the treaty could really ever be proved. The new legislative measure of 1866 allowed for the prosecution of violators of the law to address the suppression and punishment of the slave trade. Also, the law provided the death penalty for its violators. Furthermore, it demanded a careful census of all "persons of color" and provided freedom for any undeclared slaves. This latter provision began a direct assault on the practice of not registering illegally imported slaves. In addition to the law of 1866, the United States was now pressuring Cuba even more after the end of the U.S. Civil War and the approval of an abolition law in the United States. By the 1860s, however, Cuba already had a vibrant capitalist economy and the colonial system was becoming an obstacle to Cuban development, and it became a serious point of contention between Cuban criollos (Spaniards born in the Americas) and Spaniards. Most plantation owners on the island advocated independence from Spain because they considered taxes to be excessive and a burden to sustain potential economic growth. However, they did not necessarily support the abolitionist movements on the island because they also relied on cheap labor to make their plantations profitable. Despite the apparent
contradictions, the revolutionary war for independence started in October of 1868.

The causes of the Ten Year War (1868-1878) were both economic and political. Eventually, an abolitionist ideology was adopted as well, but certainly not at the beginning. This event forced Spain to move at a faster pace and deal with the issue of slavery in Cuba, and it responded with a new legal proposal. The Moret Law of 1870 was definitely the first tangible measure presented by Spain towards gradual emancipation. On May 28, 1870, Sesigmundo Moret presented to the Spanish Cortes his “Preparatory Law for the Abolition of Slavery in the Spanish Antilles.” The law, which became commonly known as the law of *vientres libres* (loosely translated as “freedom of the womb”) was a step in the right direction. It intended to provide freedom to all children that were born in 1870 or thereafter and to free the slaves that were sixty years of age or older. However, the restrictions of the law were quickly revealed to the slave population. Namely, the children born after that date (the so-called *libertos*) had to remain under a system of tutelage (*patronato*, a tutelage or «supervisión» system to continue owning slaves intended to be freed in the future.) until they were eighteen years old. During that time, the master could still benefit from the labor of these children and could even continue to sell them as long as they were sold together with their slave mothers. The Moret Law was received with a mixture of reactions. It fell below the expectations of abolitionist groups in Britain, the United States, and Spain. On the other hand, it was considered too extreme by the Cuban sugar planters and merchants who thought that such a measure would be harmful to the Cuban economy. Sesigmundo Moret himself was clearly aware that his legal proposal was a compromise between the conservative elements and the abolitionist movements. On the surface, the Moret Law can be perceived as abolitionist, but a detailed analysis reveals that it perpetuated the same pattern of plantation labor because it only required the freedom of children and old slaves, none of which were crucial in the harvest of sugar cane.

For all practical purposes, the Cuban Ten Year War failed, and the slavery system managed to stay alive through the war. The first major war of independence was unsuccessful mostly because it was confined...
to the east side of the island. This revolutionary movement did not attack the west, where the plantations and sources of wealth were concentrated. While the war was a disappointment, the Pact of Zanjón in 1878 secured the commitment of Spain to make certain reforms in the field of abolition.

By 1880, Spain's response to the end of the war was yet another law called the Ley de Patronato in which Spain signed an end to slavery but with a gradual transition of eight years. The slaves became patrocinados (the slaves that were promised freedom eventually, but still had to remain under a system of supervision by their masters), but their labor was still controlled by their masters. This change in terminology can be viewed as semantic freedom, but without the reality of emancipation. It was another attempt to stretch and preserve the use of slavery, but it was disguised as gradual freedom. This time, however, large numbers of slaves refused to continue to work while their freedom status remained unclear. As a result, Spain ended the process two years early, and it declared slavery officially over in 1886 by dismantling the tutelage system it had previously established. The decree of October 7, 1886, was the final blow to the institution of slavery in Cuba, but it was still presented with the usual apology:

Unfortunately, it is true that slavery had an asylum on our soil as with the most cultured nations; but our character, our religious beliefs, and other causes too numerous to investigate, had established relations between master and serf less violent and less unjust than is characteristic of the institution.29

The long, legal, economic, political, and social struggle for the abolition of slavery had finally come to an end. At that time, there were only 30,000 blacks left who remained under the system of slavery. In reality, the law that finally provided emancipation in Cuba had been expected for so long that it did not produce any social agitation. Its nature was almost anticlimactic.30 Perhaps Leslie Rout provides the best summary of the struggle for emancipation by stating that slavery was never really abolished - it just died of old age.31
V. Concluding remarks

The data presented in this paper confirms that the transition from slavery to free labor in Cuba was a gradual process. The period between 1817-1886 represents the social struggle for abolition, and those decades are precisely the focus of this study. The laws that restricted slavery during this period were approved, delayed, and amended when it was convenient for economic, social, and political reasons. Seventy years is certainly a long time for slaves who kept hoping for a definite end to slavery.

Researchers have offered theories and interpretations to explain why slavery ended in Cuba at a time when the sugar industry was still so strong. According to Moreno, technical improvements (the steam engine and railroads) were incompatible with slavery since sugar production was more efficient. This industry had also turned into a capital-based investment for the wealthy. While his claim seems to be partially true, it is also important to point out that the use of these technical innovations was limited to the ingenios, where the process of refining the sugar was carried out. However, there was no technological method to improve the efficiency of slave labor to cut the sugar cane and reduce the amount of work in the fields. If anything, as the sugar mills became more efficient, it meant that plantation owners needed more slaves to work in the zafra (cultivation of sugar) just to keep up with the ingenios. In fact, Laird W. Bergard analyzes the relation between slave prices and the income yields provided by each slave. He concludes that any labor that the owner could get out of a slave beyond three years of service meant an economic advantage of slave labor over free wage labor. These results challenge the notion that slavery collapsed due to its economic inefficiency.

A review of the literature and data available leads to the conclusion that the end of slavery in 1886 was the result of both domestic and external factors. Within Cuba, the new availability of contract workers allowed the planters to invest their capital not in slaves but in other sectors of the sugar industry. The Ten Year War (or attempt for independence) in Cuba also forced Spain to take a more definitive position towards legal emancipation. The Spanish Crown responded with the Moret Law of 1870, which granted freedom to children and older slaves. From abroad, Spain continued to receive mounting
pressure from the United States and Britain to formally end the slave trade. The final law arrived in 1886 to put an end to a moribund institution of slavery that had lasted over three hundred years within the Spanish colonial system. Based on the data analyzed in this paper, it seems axiomatic that the history of Cuba is directly tied to the history of sugar. However, this relationship turned out to be a bittersweet experience.

**Notes**

2 Ibid, p. 60.
4 Tratado entre Su Majestad el Rey de España y de las Indias y Su Majestad el Rey del Reyno Unido de la Gran Bretaña e Irlanda, para la abolición del trafico de negros, 23 de setiembre de 1817. (1983). Mexico City: Rolston-Bain (Edición Facsimilar).
5 Under the Portuguese Crown, Brazil was the country with the unenviable recognition of being the last country to abolish slavery in the Americas in 1888.
6 Curtin, Phillip. (1969). *The Atlantic Slave Trade* (p. 46). Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1969. Curtin’s quantitative research is certainly outstanding for the time it was done. However, see Rout (1976) for a critical analysis of the research methodology used by Curtin (pp. 62-63).
7 Moreno Fraginals, 1978, Vol. 1, pp. 269-271. Many of these records have been published as part of the *Parliamentary Papers* and other records are kept in the Public Records Office in England.
8 Zanneti and García, 1987, p. xvi.
10 Rout, 1976.
11 Rout, *op cit*, pp. 62-63. He discusses the methodological problems with Curtin (1969) because Curtin did not necessarily count *piezas de indias* (the way in which slaves were counted. One slave was not always equivalent to one «piece of a person in the Indies.»), as slaves were sold, but rather numbers of slaves. The problem is further compounded when slaves were sold as one ton of weight to be equivalent to three *piezas de indias*, and not necessarily three slaves.
13 Clementi, 1975.
14 Clementi, *op cit*, pp. 201-203.
19 Scott, Rebecca, 1985, pp. 25-53.
20 Iglesias García, 1985, pp. 54-76.
21 Corwin, 1968.
Bibliography

Primary sources


Tratado entre Su Majestad el Rey de España y de las Indias y Su Majestad el Rey del Reino Unido de la Gran Bretaña e Irlanda, para la abolición del tráfico de negros, 23 de setiembre de 1817. (1983). Mexico City: Rolston-Bain. (Edición Facsimilar).

General reference materials


Secondary sources


