

# Cuba: Sinister Paradoxes. The Golden Age of Colonial Economics in the Context of the Abolition of the Slave Trade

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**T**wo hundred years barely cover the existence of three human lives. If one considers them in their total discreet time, one is at once surprised and awed by how much our world has advanced in the last two centuries. Humanity's enormous effort, its talent, its indefatigable love for searching and development elevated the human species during that same time period, dissipating, as if by prodigious magic, the dark millennia that separated us from the modernity we pridefully embrace today, though not without some discomfort.

It was two hundred years ago that the British King George III decreed the aboli-

tion of the slave trade; only recently had the fertile fields been sown with a need for knowledge, progress, novelty and the revolutionary transformations that were made reality during the Enlightenment. Once these physiocratic precepts (involving a system of political economy based upon the supremacy of natural order developed by Quesnay of France in the 1700s) were disseminated, the essential brilliance of the Encyclopedia, with its semblance of scientific progress, its defense of social prosperity and a marked philanthropic nature, became the rule. Enlightenment despotism put forth animated political ideals that



were said to have a generous reformatory spirit. These were—after all—times of unprecedented impetus. On the one hand there were the principles of the French Revolution, synthesized in the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen, particularly in their transcendental demand for “Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité.” Then came the Industrial Revolution. Great Britain, in its transformation into the world’s factory, with the advent of mechanized industry, brought about the end of servitude and feudal fragmentation, the development of commerce and the exploitation of the colonies.

We already know that it was just this new order of things, which came about because of this great industrial revolution (and the bourgeoisie’s concomitant rise to power). This brought about the first decrees for the abolition of the trade in African slaves. Denmark did it in 1792. Later, in 1803, Haiti’s independence from

colonialism, the first in Latin America, definitively ensured the future of abolition. Yet, this also embedded fear of another radical revolution such as Haiti’s in the hearts and minds of those in power in Cuba. For many decades, this fear translated into repression against blacks and a more conservative turn for the island’s elite. The year 1807 brought with it a prohibition on the rigging and fitting of slave ships in British territories. A year later the bringing of slaves to both England and the United States was also outlawed. In 1881 courts were established to punish slavers in Sierra Leone. The Treaty of Paris, in 1814; the Vienna declaration, in 1815; the agreement signed in 1817 by plenipotentiaries from Madrid and London abolishing or limiting slave trafficking, which was extended in 1835; or the dictum with which France pronounced slavery illegal in its colonies in 1848—all these represent some of the most outstanding hallmarks regard-

ing the issue of slavery. Yet, we also know that none of these accords, promulgations and/or laws, not even all together, would be enough to end the suffering of Africans, whose four centuries represented what no one at this time can ever doubt—the most barbarous and greatest genocide ever recorded in human history.

Human concerns, even those that when analyzed in their minutest details seem the most complicated, are almost always quite simple in their essence. With that paradox in mind (and it would be difficult to find another more practical or comforting one), one might be able to understand the contradiction in the simultaneity in time and space of two so apparently irreconcilable events—the great genocide and the illuminating effects of the Enlightenment.

Today, it would be an oversimplification to say that the end justified the means. The lesson to learn from these events goes way beyond that and is much more gloomy and revealing. Any time the end, itself, contains its own legitimization and “greatness,” the means (savage, criminal, even more so if one sees them within a context we all consider decisive as far as human progress and advancement towards modern civilization are concerned) imposed themselves as the only alternative for the end. Thus, they not only justified themselves but were also—incredibly—understood and authenticated with regard to the end.

Of course, moral principles have and must always function with the limits of history. Morality’s parameters, which grow or shrink according to each era and through the very actions of men, cannot be established by any law, much less by economic and/or political formulations: they are the product of necessity and people’s attempts. And they can be justified only through the

harmonious, conscious and orderly concurrence of men with their peers. This was the substance of any teaching based on those high Enlightenment ideals, with their focus on the betterment of each country’s life and culture, on the restoration of national wealth and fomentation of populaces, on the improvement of the value ascribed to the so-called inferior classes. The rights of man, more than eras, interests, statutes, philosophical or political currents, were essential for the transparency of the spirit between human beings. Just as in the case of the administration of justice—real justice—whether or not it is legislated. The condemnation of an innocent person (there are still millions) is just as unjust today as it was for eighteenth- and nineteenth-century luminaries—and as inhumane as unjust. There is no other way to look at it. That is why the positive emotion one feels upon reviewing modernity’s achievements is dulled by the shock and fear one also feels upon confirming its terrible blemishes on account of slavery and slave trafficking. It is as if Africa was not part of the world at that time, as if her children were not (were not considered) part of Humanity. Moreover, let us not talk about the fact that slave trafficking occurred before (and, in great measure, in support of) the accomplishments of those times but rather of what might have happened from the moment circumstances and good judgment advised the decreed abolition of slave trafficking.

“From 1807 to 1847,” according to the data we read from the British and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society in Cuban researcher José Luciano Franco’s book *Ensayos históricos* [Historical Essays], “about 5,048,506 Africans were kidnapped from Africa to be sold in America, of which

117,380 were captured by English ships and 1,121,299 perished during the crossing.”<sup>1</sup> This is just one lone fact (among so many) to illustrate the contradictory, which does not end in just one paradox but multiple ones. In the case of Cuba, for example, we encounter one with particular overtones, especially sinister ones.

### *The Golden Age*

After the first half of the eighteenth century Cuba was still only seventh among the sugar producers of the Greater and Lesser Antilles. Its sugar producing capacity lagged way behind that of three other major sugar producers of the time: Brazil, Jamaica and Haiti. Historian Ramiro Guerra cites a census that states that in 1774 there were only 23 slaves for every one hundred inhabitants in Cuba.<sup>2</sup> This situation would soon wildly change. Upon the insistence of landowners and other prominent criollos, Cuba opened itself up to the unencumbered introduction of African slaves, by which it became the world’s third greatest producer of sugar by the end of the eighteenth century. As Manuel Moreno Fraginals would later say: “[Sugar] and blacks grow in equal numbers on the island.”<sup>3</sup> And that was only the beginning. For Cuban traffickers and slavers, the time of economic apotheosis and criminal shame would coincide exactly with the times and places in which the colonialist countries of Europe were decreeing the abolition of the slave trade. It is a chapter of the nation’s history unabashedly calls the Golden Age.

Cubans had to confront two great obstacles in order to jumpstart the events that led them to this economic “miracle”—they had to single-handedly strengthen the slave trade and promote free trade with foreign entities, both impediments for them

because of Cuba’s condition as an island colonized by Spain, which always kept Havana as the most backward of all the great ‘European’ cities. Naturally, they simply had to plough forth in the first instance, continuing to depend on international slave traffickers. But in order to increase their profit, Cuban landowners obviously had to assume control over every aspect of the business. More so when the era’s abolition decrees offered them a unique opportunity. These declarations were the mother lode that was going to permit them to pile up gold via a clandestine slave trade.

Thus the Cuban sugar barons (aided, as was natural, by their Spanish colonial regents) started their Cyclopean careers as apprentice slave traffickers, as a consequence of their booming industry. José Luciano Franco explains:

“Because the year 1807 signaled the moment in which England and the United States abolished the slave trade, the learning curve increased, since it is known that the sugar wealth of the island depends upon the creation of a national slave trade now more than ever. Of course the U.S. abolition law was never obeyed and at the beginning the English one indirectly favored criollo Spanish slave traders.”<sup>4</sup>

Manuel Moreno Fraginals, for his part, maintains that at that time there was a constant traffic of slaves made possible through English consignees. “It is a proven fact,” he adds, “that these consignees were present in Cuba even right when their activity on the island was entirely prohibited.”<sup>5</sup> José Luciano Franco adds:

“From March 1806 to February 1807 more than 30 ships—manned by U.S. personnel, flying U.S. colors and carrying close to five thousand blacks to be sold

there as slaves—entered the port of Havana. These were consigned, in large measure, to U.S. businessmen established there [in Havana]. The details of these facts can be corroborated in documents at the National Archive: Libros-Miscelanea 4611 (1806-1807).”<sup>6</sup>

Ramiro Guerra elucidates further that:

“[the] treaty of 1817 was always null.

Estimates show that more than 300 slaving expeditions arrived in Cuba between 1821 and 1831, and English ships were only able to catch four percent of these, despite all their vigilance. No fewer than 60,000 slaves were introduced during those years, according to conservative estimates. Mahy, Kindelán and Vives, the three Captains General of that time, practiced unlimited tolerance for slave trafficking.”<sup>7</sup>

José Luciano Franco cites a speech given in the House of Commons (in its twentieth session, on July 20, 1861) in London, that reveals U.S. and French activities involving clandestine slave trafficking in these lands: “How is it carried out and how have we been kept from putting an end to it?” the speaker asks. Mr. Buxton and he, himself, reply: “It comes from the corruption of all the authorities in Cuba and from the apathy of the Spanish government, from Madrid. We have presented, we have offered evidence of the fact that the slave trade is flourishing, that the Captains General go [to Cuba] poor and return rich.”<sup>8</sup> To complete our understanding of this situation, the following fragment from *El ingenio* [The Sugarmill], Moreno Fragnals’ copious and essential book, should suffice:

With their business drying up, the British had no problem with selling the Spanish their know how about the slave trade. Meanwhile, islanders and peninsu-

lars paid huge sums for the ownership transfer of the huge ‘slave warehouses’ established on the coast of Africa. What the British actually transferred was not just the business’s technology but also its whole infrastructure, created, as it was, over two centuries of dominance in African slave trafficking. This allowed the Cádiz and Havana enterprises to reach their masters’ level in just a few years.<sup>9</sup>

The detailed nature of this last source makes it easy for one to get a broad idea of the dizzying (and grim) way the traffic in slaves to Cuba grew once it was primarily under criollo and Spanish control. In fewer than eight years (between 1809 and 1817), 278 expeditions (all brought by criollo and/or Spanish slavers) carrying a total of 60,368 African captives arrived in the ports of Havana, Matanzas, Santiago de Cuba and Trinidad. Moreno Fragnals specifies:

“The productivity of these expeditions actually reveals more about the criollo/Spanish learning curve than about the increased number of expeditions, itself: 157 blacks per expedition in 1809; 185 during the years 1810 and 1812; 207 in 1814; 253 in 1815; and, 255 in 1816.”<sup>10</sup>

Meanwhile, Cuba’s reign as the new sugar potentate was already under way. Furthermore, the changes that occurred in its population were marked. Citing results from a census that was carried out on the island right in 1817, Ramiro Guerra comments that:

“[in] twenty-six years [the] population had increased beyond that of 1791 by 132%, but its composition had also changed notably. The white population, which was suddenly the minority, was 10.42% lower than the total population; the slave population, on the other hand,

constituted 11.83% more of the population than in 1791.”<sup>11</sup>

Of course, these changes in social composition would later point to transformations of no less transcendancy in our history, but that is another matter (or another facet of the same issue). What I am trying to do at this moment is to trace, *grosso modo*, the dismal panorama that served as the backdrop for the Cuban sugar elite to create its highly celebrated Golden Age, a period of unparalleled economic effervescence that would not only become the mainstay of the island’s future wealth but also make it so its sugar-fueled development was built upon the pillage, pain and blood of Africa.

We have already seen that the effect of the Anglo-Spanish treaty that was signed on September 23, 1817 for the abolition of the slave trade in Cuba, starting June 30, 1820, was for all practical purposes null. It might behoove us to connect to this phenomenon two nefarious but effective consequences. First, the creation of a legal time limit by which the trade should end represented, in practice, an extra incentive for national traffickers to increase in number and specialize. Historians have alluded to the nearly overnight emergence of no fewer than twenty, highly solvent and organized “commercial” entities (no wonder Moreno Friginals asserts that: “upon the prospect of an international anti-slavery movement, the five-year period between 1816-1820 experienced a nearly uncontrolled amount of slave importation, for a total of 111,014 blacks”).<sup>12</sup> Secondly, once the time was up for any “legal” entry of Africans to our shores trafficking became an even more sinister and—yet worse—clandestine activity. Concurrent with the hiding of any kind of official information about the busi-

ness came not only a concomitant rise in its operating costs and “product,” that is, as a business it became more attractive and lucrative. So instead of rejecting their business, which was now exceptionally prosperous, our traffickers made efforts to increase it, making sure to cover their new risks. For example, their increased volume of imported slaves increased the tonnage displacement on their slave ships, thereby putting at further risk their money, although the risk for the slaves continued to be even greater.

In short, both the earlier date (1817) and the later one (1835), when the Spanish and British agreed to seek an end to the slave trade in and to Cuba, are both extremely important for the Cuban slave trade. As Moreno Friginals explains:

“Caribbean slave traffickers begin to move about in total freedom by the decade of the 1850s. One can add a decrease in English vigilance to the assistance new and experienced traffickers offered as factors that helped the [Cuban] sugar barons solve their pressing shortage of ‘arms’ [workers]. In effect, the end of the Brazilian slave trade in around 1850-1851 causes Santa Catalina’s businessmen to start rerouting their shipments to Havana.”<sup>13</sup>

Although it is well known that the accuracy of such figures is questionable, given the nature of these operations, Moreno Friginals, himself, cites period estimates (both included) that suggest that the number of slaves introduced during 1821-1860 was from 256,215 to 375,602.<sup>14</sup>

In April 1862, in the midst of the war between Northern capitalism and Southern feudalism, Abraham Lincoln, the President of the United States, was in Washington signing an Anglo-American treaty to end slave trafficking on the continent. As is well known, Lincoln’s victory over Southern

forces would be extremely important for the total elimination of slavery in those lands. This great moment no doubt marked the final days of Cuba's so-called Golden Age, even if the island's slave trade was not entirely defunct at that time.

Some years later, not many, in fact (in any event no more than fifty years passed between the time the British abolition of the slave trade), the very last slaves clandestinely arrived to our shores from Africa.

### *The Paradox*

When Fernando Ortiz described the thronged civic processions celebrating the end of slavery that irrupted through the streets of Havana in 1886 he confirmed that this event in fact symbolized the end of Spanish colonial domination in Cuba.<sup>15</sup> This statement was somewhat emphatic and extreme, perhaps, if one considers the years and circumstances (as well as the relevant role of some of our historical figures) that had yet to weigh in on an end to colonialism in Cuba. But the emphasis with which Ortiz makes his statement is understandable, in the sense that just as sugar production grew on a par with and dependant on slave trafficking, slavery (particularly during the Industrial Revolution) came to sum up the backward nature of Spain, obstinate as it was in its absolutist and lordly practices while the rest of the colonial powers had shown that slave labor was even less productive and beneficial than that of paid laborers. This is one of the first paradoxes that become obvious when one examines the Cuban case, in the context of the process of the abolition of the slave trade. Underlying everything is an elementary (essentially cruel) explanation: while slaves ceased being useful "tools" in Great Britain, becoming, in fact, an obstacle to industrial

development, the Spanish crown, always saga-loving, not only continued to consider them essential from an economic point of view but also from that of an idiosyncratic one tied to methods that were as primitive as they were fixed. This is when the paradox finds its coherence, one might say. It might result even more difficult, or at least disheartening, to try to make sense of yet another obvious paradox that becomes obvious in this case—the attitude of cultured criollos, who benefited from the advances of their time and, and quite specifically from among them, those who gathered round a figure who has come down in history as representative and paradigmatic of the essence of the whole thing: Francisco de Arango y Parreño. In 1792, this illustrious gentleman who was catalogued by historians as one of the sharpest bourgeois minds of his time in America, had written that "[nothing] was a fallible or equivocal as human hope."<sup>16</sup> In one fell swoop of his pen, his phrase, although not written with this express purpose, seems to have anticipatedly reduced what the abolition of the slave trade process would mean for slaves in Cuba. But Parreño was also precisely the first promoter and principal enthusiast of what we know as the Golden Age as regards the Cuban colonial economy and what we could call the great African tragedy in our lands.

What is paradoxical is that unlike with those colonial Spanish representatives, one could only limitedly say of this man that he had a backward mentality, much less a limited view of economics and politics, or of any other intellectual pursuit. To the contrary, Francisco de Arango y Parreño was a lucid, highly cultured intellectual, a cosmopolitan man who was well aware of the progress in technological advances and the

more enlightened ideas of his time. Yet, he not only tolerated criminal activity but also greatly inspired it. He not only enriched himself from it but also personally set forth the most diverse arguments validating and/or justifying it. May history forgive me, but no matter how one looks at this situation, and not ignoring his well-known merit as a reformer and autonomist, these facts about him make him a soulless political reactionary.

The above cited quote from Parreño comes from his “Discurso sobre la agricultura de La Habana y medios de fomentarla” [Speech about agriculture in Havana and ways to promote it], which historians consider the most complete work on the sugar industry written in the Cuba of its time. It is precisely in this document (“una lección de economía, seca, franca, sin más preocupaciones éticas que el dinero ni más objetivos, fundamentalmente, que la producción de azúcar a bajo costo” [a dry, direct economics lesson with no more ethical concern than money or no goal other than to produce sugar at a low cost]), that the premises that brought about the Golden Age are substantiated.<sup>17</sup>

As a leader among the intellectual voices of the Cuban sugar elite, as a sugar baron himself, this man linked slave trafficking with the economic prosperity of the island (as well as that of its colonial capital) from the very start. He was a precursor of this as well as other projects of abhorrent memory. One should also not overlook the fact that at a time when the national average for slaves per sugarmill was eighty, the enormous and monstrous ingenio “La Ninfa” [The Nymph], of which he was the owner, had 350 slaves. Moreno Fraguas explains that it was a matter of course that such a percentage of African slaves should

had been acquired “by means of the public monies Francisco de Arango y Parreño and Land Commissioner Pablo José Valiente stole.”<sup>18</sup>

Virtually in the heat of that adventure, it was also precisely upon Parreño’s insistence that the Royal Consulate of Cuba created a system of economic incentives and tributary exemptions for the local “businessmen” who ventured into the slave trade. It seems that according to the ethical values of the very wise criollo “bringing blacks [to Cuba] was nothing more than a contribution to the development and multiplication of the nation’s wealth. Thus, it is not surprising that he brought about these expeditions, sometimes using his own personal capital, and other using that of his front men, always at Africa’s expense.

By the beginning of the nineteenth century, Parreño estimated that his buddies—the landowners— had paid an average of 200 pesos a year for slave labor versus the 400 pesos they would have to pay for a free laborer. So, blacks were a good investment (leaving all scruples aside). Thus, the slave trade and slavery (vs. cosmopolitan ideas, on the other side) were the road to sugar expansion. This is no doubt a sinister paradox, not the first or the last with which Francisco de Arango y Parreño and his kind would forever blemish our history.

After 1832, after having applied his sharp intelligence to the national slave trade, and having for three decades been the owner of one the largest sugar mills in the whole world, Parreño woke up one morning worried about the fate of African slaves. He suddenly realized they were treated worse than beasts. So he decided to start suggesting one or another measure to try, as he said, to humanize their existence. These measures were useless against the



slaves' actual, real functionality, though they were elegant and, above all, very Christian. Was this just one more paradox? Perhaps the most disconcerting of all, depending on how one looks at it, although it is really not as disconcerting as the naïvety of those who thought (and still think) they saw in those apparently changed ideas (but not conduct) a moral impulse or, at the very least, a way to assuage their consciences. But this is just one more bit of evidence of how there was a clarifying coherence underlying the actual paradox. It seems that Parreño's talent for coldly calculating finances and politics was far more important than any moral motivation, and that his essay was just the vacuous product of an all-night writing stint. The explanation for this is once again elementary (basically cruel). Clear as day, Moreno Friginals, himself, provides it when he says that at the height of these circumstances:

“[slavery] was a life and death condition of sugar producing. It intellectually stultified bourgeoisie development and eliminated the sacarocracy's political possibilities. But this suppression means economic ruin and, of course, the class's disappearance. Arango sees the problem clearly: it was necessary to end the slave trade to limit the trafficking businessmen's growing power. In parallel fashion, it was necessary to create a huge market for work in order to permit the abolition of slavery, establish a more rational method of production and increase the growers' profits.”<sup>19</sup>

Seen from this perspective, perhaps it won't be too tiresome to add one more to the list of principal causes for that 'surprising' humanistic move made by Francisco de Arango y Parreño: the climate of terror that by then swept whites (only powerful

and rich whites) before the prospect of a majority black population, a phenomenon that the slave trade made worse with each month that passed and as it became an uncontrollable deluge.

To conclude, not due to a shortage of arguments but of space, I would like to reveal one more paradox, one that is typified by no less than the first exponent of the Industrial Revolution that brought to Cuba new rules for the production of sugar: the railroad. Our researchers have already noted that novel advances in the sugar industry came to the island not via the steam engine as it was applied to the trapiche [the crushing rollers that express the sugar cane juice] but rather by means of train lines. But there is one fact that is directly related to this process that has not been sufficiently discussed to date. Inaugurated, as it was, on November 19, 1838, at the height of sugar production in Havana, San Julián de los Güines, the Cuban railroad was party to another headline episode of hair raising crimes against the children of Africa. In his detailed publication, Moreno Friginals discusses it in passing, but also with his typical sharpness:

“In the years 1837 to 1839, the Royal Consulate rented the runaway slave deposits (holding pens) in order to put those blacks to work on constructing the railroad to Güines. The number of blacks who died doing this railroad work is truly shocking; although how many really perished will never be known and nor for how many a death certificate was actually issued in order to make them disappear from the deposit in a way that fulfilled all legal requirements.”<sup>20</sup>

The only thing that remains to be said about this is that these abovementioned “runaway slave deposits” were also a prod-

uct of Arango y Parreño's restless mind. He, who published many brilliant studies, and masterfully examined the island's most important economic and social problems, also produced (from the shadows) the "Nuevo reglamento y arancel que debe gobernar en la captura de los negros cimarrones" [New Rules and Tariffs that should Govern the Capture of Runaway Slaves], a code whose purpose it was to increase the efficacy and maintain the low cost of catching and redeploying those slaves who managed to escape from their masters.

The paradoxes of some men, from a particular moment in time do not seem difficult for us to judge without some caution (when seen today, through the advantageous lense of historical distance). There are those who might consider that some of the judgements I have pronounced herein too severe. They may be right. Human behavior cannot be reduced to mathematical calculations (not in the past or now or in the future, unless we are replaced by robots). It is not necessarily the case that the whole is equal to the sum of its parts. Seen in this manner, which is better than viewing it from the perspective that we judge old behaviors using current concepts, my reproach seems acceptable and understandable. There is no reason for us to lose sight of the fact that we are not talking about the first moments of human civilization. We are talking about the eighteenth

century, the renown Enlightenment, and even about subsequent events and attitudes.

If we must accept that in a juridical sense many of those men were not criminals (the law does not consider them as such and they never faced any court's charges), let us at least accept that the crime, as an expression of impulses, decisions, and appetites that were in no way unconscious, was deeply rooted in their entrails. Thus, the most dangerous criminals were those who controlled jurisprudence and created and "forced compliance with" the laws. Even so, the saddest and also most difficult thing to accept, because it was not for lack of legislation but for weakness of spirit, might be that these men could not have imagined themselves in their victims' place or just consider them as even remotely human and primordially related to them.

However, in retrospect, the greatest paradox (and most sinisterly perturbing thing) of all is that if Parreño and the other eminences of the era had put their vast genius, their perseverance and their indefatigable energies to work not only economic progress (although without disdainning it) but also on decency and full-fledged humanism, their efforts might not have triumphed. Wasn't it Karl Marx, himself, who pronounced that without slave labor capital would have perished or been reduced to just the small quantities that each person could use for him or herself?

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