Céspedes Frees His Slaves: Two Hypotheses

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Herein you will find my two contrasting hypotheses about on the most reiterated, national and historical constructions in Cuba, one that has been continuously repeated for almost a century and a half: Carlos Manuel de Céspedes' liberation of his slaves. In recent decades, disagreement about this important act in the Cuban imaginary, however, what I propose is quite different. With my first hypothesis, my intention is to take a certain historiographical position; with the second, I attempt to explain how the nation's construction is validated from the point of view of blacks and their probable thinking.

Position I

On October 10, 1868, the man who started the struggle, who would later be raised to the position of Founding Father, spoke to his slaves to tell them they were free. For the time being, let us consider this event a speech act or communicative action. The term 'speech act' I owe to John L. Austin; the second to Jürgen Habermas. What I want to question here is if what Céspedes proposed to his slaves was the beginning of a speech act in which "something goes wrong."

After consulting other authors, I want to examine the potentially most impactful communicative action in our island's political and cultural history. According to Habermas, "if we were not able to consult a model of speech, we would not be able analyze the meaning of two subjects understanding each other."[2]

For the uninitiated, I should explain that a speech act is a statement that in its self constitutes an action that transforms the context, the tie between he who speaks and the interlocutor or receiver. One of the most common examples used to demonstrate this is: "I declare you man and wife," which, once accepted by the interlocutors, becomes an immediate reality. Thus, what I am getting at is that a speech act produces a change in the world, which, of course, should result in just that.

That speech act would be described as a radical, abolitionist action by a legion of historians. It would be offered as the first step in a process that began with the liberation of blacks, something about which the Founding Father was not ambiguous, according to said historiography. The statement, which was made before "a large group of slaves," was recorded as such: "Citizens, up until now you have been my slaves.[3] Henceforth, you are as

Céspedes frees his slaves

free as I am. Cuba needs all her children to conquer its independence. Those who wish to follow me, do so; those who wish to stay will remain free, like the rest."[4] Revealingly, though, the leader forgot to give each one of them his or her manumission letter, which would have officially guaranteed the purpose of his statement.

In 1998, an author who neglected to mention the absence of the slaves' voices, wrote: "The landed slave owner [Céspedes] immediately freed himself of that burden, became a liberator, and in lifting up his former slaves suffered them onto himself as equals and peers. Granting freedom to his slaves may have made him a philanthropist; making them his equals made him revolutionary. He imposed nothing on them. They had the right either to go or not go with him to the battle. It was supreme proof of his liberal and democratic ideals. Any later departure from this would simply be the result of political tactics."[5]

What could have happened concerning Céspedes' liberation of his slaves that day, an event held as the most glorious in our national history and date that Cuba holds as a holiday? Is there any segment of the population that could reproach the fact that an authentic and just change did not take place for its history, freedom and equality? Let me try to answer that question because it reflects the start of a rhetoric whose fundamental principles are still applied, even today.

Habermas makes sure to clarify the bilateral relationship between identical subjects, as well as absolute diversity, so that two people can engage in unperturbed dialogue.[6] It is common for people to say that this dialogue could only be possible between equals. In his statement, Céspedes creates the image of communication between equals, one, that is, capable of consensuality. In addition, though, when he calls his interlocutors 'citizens,' he treats them like subjects, and suggests brotherhood when he refers to Cuba's children.

If Austin establishes a relationship of 'mishap or misfortune'that can lead to certain speech acts, he specifies that his theory allows him to see which are null or voidable[7] through wrongful violence of influence, i.e. when the basis for something's validity suffers at a level that can break communication, then the speech act is null or voidable.[8] Yet, it happens that Céspedes found himself in a position of having power prior to, during, and after the speech act.

If from the very beginning of our analysis this action can be called into question, due to its normative behavior, it may not be possible theoretically to consider it a speech act. Thus, I'd like to see whether or not it marked the beginning of a future, possible interracial dialogue that in the twenty-first century is still plagued by incoherencies, impositions of power, suspicion of the oppressed, vagueness, and half-hearted or delayed solutions—all of which blocks the road to just change in the world. The fact that the aforementioned speech act is even in doubt as a speech act, given the definition, already says enough.

Without serious exception, historiography confirms the freedom that Céspedes suddenly gave his slaves. Yet, is this actually true, or did was this born in the nation's establishing imaginary? Let us consider the context. Pro-independence landowners enlisted their slaves for the war prior to the conflict's onset, that is, before Céspedes carried out the aforementioned speech act.[9] Isn't it the case that slaves were necessary to the dawning revolution, something the leader emphasized in his statement? This questions leads to others and further rarify this moment's echo: What was this speech act's validity, when history's logic and the struggle's imperatives reveal that the slaves were obliged to follow their revolutionary leaders, their owners? There is no doubt that "something was not right" about this communicative action.

We know of no responsible testimony that tells us that the slaves' voices were heard and, as often happens, silence is what reigns in this *locus*. There is also no doubt as to the fact that power excludes blacks, silences them, and erases them—á la Derrida—at the very least. The receptor's understanding must be correct, and the speaker sincere; these are the two conditions that must prevail for a speech act to be "ideal," according to Austin and Habermas, from albeit different points of view.

In addition, silence may well have been the attitude assumed by those who were compelled to participate in an unequal dialogue and, thus, have less power within the communicative action, beyond the rebel leader's sincere or insincere desire to have engaged in a real dialogue between equal and free men. Many of those slaves must have been overwhelmed by a flood of questions like: 'What freedom, what war and independence is the master speaking of" and "why does he now promise manumission, when he should have done so much earlier?" The silent answer was not meant to imply tacit consent, but more like what one might consider "eloquent silence."

Beatriz Gallardo Paúls, following Judy A. Davidson, proposes that silence after an invitation, offer, request or proposal indicates that they will probably be refused. In this situation, the speaker takes advantage of that delay to counterattack with some sort of insistance.[10] In the case that concerns us, said insistence was not expressed. As their master, Céspedes did not need to convince his slaves, who were obligated to follow him, that is, Davidson's affirmation does not work here. Given silence is at the core of the dialogic, a receptor in a conversation between equals who wants to abandon a topic can do so by using silence and not collaborating in the conversation.[11]

We could look at other implications of silence, how speech acts are classified, so-called abuse of the procedure—as in "unfortunate" and "fortunate" ones—however, let us look at the conclusions. A lack of truthfulness is one of the requirements that restrict the validity of speech, and for Habermas this occurs when a speaker does not expressly state his true intention; he knows his statement is false and hides from others that he knows it.[12] Yet, this affects communication "only when it serves to mask a conflict."[13]

The freedom the *caudillo* concedes seems a solution, but whoever hears his declaration finds in it a conflict that distorts the message. Such it is also a perturbed communicative action, which is synonymous with Habermas' "unfortunate" speech act. If this speech act appears doubtful given its definition in linguistic theory, if one could even call it a 'Cespedian' act (only one voice), it would be hard to find a place or label in said theory for this instant. Of course, we would prefer to define

it as Austin does, among speech acts that are "difficult and marginal," when a 'precise' definition cannot clarify ambiguity.[14]

Nevertheless, it is also impossible to see the Céspedes the subject in a linear position. It is fragmented within the complex framework of difficult historical, social, and economic junctures and various political strategies. No wonder Foucault says that the subject of the statement is not the same as the author of its formulation, but that through the statement he can assign himself a subject position.[15] So, finally, what was Céspedes' position, which affected his "racial abolitionism," at this instant? Let us focus on what facts history has to offer us. One the one hand, he decrees the freedom of his slaves, but very probably knows who among them will go to war. On the other, the slaves cannot turn him down and, of course, they can be killed if fighting in the war. Individual manumission letters would have given Céspedes' action solid substance—but these did not materialize. At that very instant, the Founding Father simultaneously produced freedom (in parenthesis) and possible death.

Upon deconstructing this foundation dialogue in Cuban history, I am not trying to present a determined or unique context. It is just a point of view reflected in the discourse and practice of those in power. As such, the power elite in Cuba continues to exhibit ambivalence and contradictions between its rhetoric, its dialogue with blacks, and reality, and all these and the needs of an oppressed race.

There may be a zero sum relationship and marginal and vague communicative action, but a conflict that is concomitantly and often masked continues on to this day in the nation's development. This is the situation in which blacks have lived permanently. They have tried to resolve it by establishing a dialogue between equals that could bring about just change in the world. In the case of the Ten Years War, nationalism would soon generate rules that would prolong slavery, which along with other factors caused an undetermined number of blacks to abandon the war for independence and take off for *palenques* (runaway slave communities) or the pro-Spanish guerilla. However, the freedom that Céspedes promised became a reality when by the end of 1870 the independence fighters legally fulfill the communicative action that started the war. This was now possible with the revolution's leader, an unknown—sixteen years before Spain would.

Position II

Up till now, I have closely examined this complex issue from specific angles. Yet, I have also underlined the fact that for slaves there was nothing more important than their freedom. In its absence, they suffered the daily psychological punishment of all it implied, that is, if we completely confide in what the patriarchal leaders of the country's eastern region thought. At the level of communicative action, at different historical moments an already undetermined number of blacks, both free and slave, had conspired against the status quo—and the island's eastern region was no exception, as Ibarra reminds us. What Céspedes offered was far from the defenselessness of fleeing, and the slave catchers' hunt, with specially trained dogs that were exported from the sixteenth century on, as Argeliers León reminds us. What followed this was punishment, death, destroyed *palenques* and an even worse existence for the survivors. This is the essence of what beat in the heart and mind of slaves.

In addition to considering the ambivalence of the revolutionary leadership both for blacks and whites, the war meant nebu-

lous and, in effect, possible death. Notwithstanding, slaves considered a way to obtain their real freedom and freed blacks as a way to achieve their rights. The blacks who heard Céspedes, and so many others who learned what he said through hearsay, must have quickly imagined themselves and then felt like soldiers, and was almost nothing like their lack of power throughout their previous history on the island. Perhaps they felt close to becoming actual subjects, armed, of course, as is the case in all wars.

Soon after the brief confusion, more than one slave must have foreseen a better future in the midst of all that Cespedian ambivalence. We also cannot in any way disconnect black silence from this array of possibilities, and this is how the national narrative earns points. It comes close to history's reality and to the justice implicit in that speech act on October 10, 1868.

Despite the fact that tensions and contradictions such as those I have suggested started the insurrection that would decisively advance the creation of the nation, Scott states that from its very beginning "the rebellion represented abolition, no matter how nominal or compromised it might be,"and goes on to add that "the slaves who could do so had every reason to flee their masters and join the ranks of the insurrectionists."[16] Via the Cespedian speech act, I have tried to understand from a black point of view what Foucault called recovering the "mute words,""thus "reestablishing a small and invisible text between its written lines"that"sometimes distorts it,"and finally to"decipher"what was actually being said in that pronouncement."[17]

Notes:

1-Austin, John L. *Cómo Hacer Cosas con Palabras* (Barcelona: Paidós, 1990): 55.
2- Habermas, Jünger. *Teoría de la Acción Comunicativa: Complementos y Estudios Previos* (Madrid: Cátedra, 2001): 385.
3- Ibarra, Jorge. *Aproximaciones a Clío* (La Habana: Editorial de Ciencias Sociales, 1979): 83.
4- de Céspedes, Carlos Manuel. *Escritos* I (Compilación Fernando Portuondo y Hortensia Pichardo). (La Habana: Editorial de Ciencias Sociales): 108-109.
5- Rodríguez, Rolando. *Cuba: la Forja de una Nación. Despunte y Epopeya* I (La Habana: Editorial de Ciencias Sociales, 1998): 190-191.
6- Habermas, 73.
7- Austin, 62.
8- Habermas, 215.
9- Ibarra, Jorge. *Patria*, *Etnia y Nación* (La Habana: Ciencias Sociales, 2007): 36.
10- Gallardo Paúls, Beatriz. "La transición entre turnos conversacionales: silencios, interrupciones y solapamientos," *Contextos* 21-22 (1993):189-220.
11- *Ibid.*
12- Subrayado de Habermas, 214.
13- *Ibid.*
14- Austin, 73.
15- Foucault. *La Arqueología* del Saber (México: Siglo XXI Editores, 2007): 159.
16- Scott, Rebecca J. *La Emancipación de los Esclavos en Cuba. La Transición al Trabajo Libre 1869-1899* (La Habana: Editorial Caminos, 2001): 95.
17- Foucault, 44-45.