

Spanish Antislavery and Africa, 1808–1898

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SPAIN HAD A LONG HISTORY WITH THE SLAVE TRADE FROM AFRICA, predating the conquest of the Americas. But Spain's connections to Africa and the slave trade set it apart from other European Atlantic empires, especially from its Iberian neighbor, Portugal, in that until the end of the eighteenth century its participation in the traffic was indirect. Through a changing system of licenses and privileges, the Spanish Crown farmed out slaving to foreign merchants and placed quotas on the number of slaves that could be carried to the American colonies. This equivocal distance from direct participation in the transatlantic slave trade, slavery without slaving, also received support from theologians and jurists troubled by Portuguese machinations in Africa. Unlike Portugal or, later on, other European empires, Spain had no trading forts on the coast of Africa until the attempt to make the island of Fernando Po into one in the 1770s and 1780s. When Bourbon officials, under intense lobbying from Caribbean planters and military pressure from Britain, unleashed the trade in 1789 they abolished the old system based on monopolistic privileges.¹ Cuban and Spanish slavers rushed to the coast of Africa and other Caribbean islands to trade with foreign merchants, though some, like Pedro Blanco, would later set up their own fugitive forts in the Gulf of Guinea.² The liberties granted in 1789 initiated a boom of slave trading to Cuba that would last, with some reverses, until 1867.

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¹ Josep M. Delgado, "The Slave Trade in the Spanish Empire (1501–1808): The Shift from Periphery to Center," in *Slavery, Empire, and Abolitionism: Spain from Overseas Expansion to Cuban Abolition*, ed. Josep M. Fradera and Christopher Schmidt-Nowara (forthcoming).

² See Michael Zeuske's article in this issue.



When Spanish abolitionists attacked the slave trade and Cuban slavery, they signaled Spain's altered relationship to Africa in their arguments. I will examine these arguments about Spain and Africa (and Cuba) by looking at antislavery in two key periods of imperial crisis: the first opened in 1808 by the French overthrow of the Bourbon monarchy, the second beginning in 1868 with the outbreak of rebellion in Cuba and the first sustained assaults on slavery and Spanish rule in the island, a crisis unresolved until the invasion of Cuba by the United States in 1898. What I hope to show is that abolitionists believed that Spain's short but intense involvement in the slave trade from Africa was a historical anomaly. Some believed that Spain must continue to absent itself from Africa; others, that it should finally undertake the robust colonization pursued by other European empires.

JOSEPH BLANCO WHITE AND ISIDORO DE ANTILLÓN: SPAIN OUT OF AFRICA

The Bourbon monarchy deregulated the slave trade to its Caribbean colonies in 1789, but public debate over the trade came into the open several years later in 1808 with the war against the French, the uprisings in Spanish America, and the uneasy alliance formed with Britain. The Cortes de Cádiz, the provisional government that carried out the resistance to the French occupation in the absence of the monarch Ferdinand VII, briefly debated banning the trade, a measure supported by both Spanish and American deputies. However, an immediate challenge from Havana, penned by the impresario of the Cuban plantation complex, Francisco Arango y Parreño, silenced the opposition. Arango argued that the Cuban plantations, fed by the slave trade from Africa, were essential to the well-being of Spain's imperial economy. Many Spaniards concurred, and no action was taken against the slave trade.

There were, however, dissenters and they sounded their criticisms from outside the Cortes. Two passionately written pamphlets by learned and prominent intellectual figures sought to sway political opinion during the resistance to the French. One was written from abroad and likely had little circulation in Spain because it appeared at the time of Ferdinand VII's restoration, when open political debate was shutting down. The author was the expatriate and former priest Joseph Blanco White, who at the behest of British abolitionists translated, and effectively rewrote, one of William Wilberforce's denunciations of the slave trade in 1814. The thrust of his arguments to potential Spanish readers (the pamphlet was circulated among Spanish officials by the British minister in Madrid) drew upon a familiar theme in Spanish criticisms of the slave trade: that Spain had never been a slave-trading power, differing significantly from its European rivals. "One must keep in mind that no other European nation has had fewer slaves, considering the extension of its colonies, nor has any other based less of its prosperity on the labor of those unhappy beings than the Spanish nation."³ Thus, the massive upsurge in slaving to Cuba and the development of the plantations were historical aberrations. He also turned to more immediate and intimate matters to provoke outrage by comparing Spanish and Cuban slaving in Africa to the French invasion and subjection of Spain. Spanish captivity was an experience that Blanco could easily invoke, as his own brother Fernando was a prisoner of war held in France between 1808 and 1814, one of tens of thousands of Spaniards who suffered a similar fate.⁴ By drawing

³ Joseph Blanco White, *Bosquejo del comercio de esclavos y reflexiones sobre este tráfico considerado moral, política y cristianamente*, ed. Manuel Moreno Alonso (1814; repr., Seville: Ediciones Alfar, 1999), 152.

⁴ Jean-René Aymes, *Los españoles en Francia, 1808–1814: La deportación bajo el Primer Imperio* (Madrid: Siglo XXI, 1987).

this parallel, Blanco was making a strong argument against the slave trade: just as France must exit Spain, so Spain must exit Africa.

Do not forget that you too have seen foreigners set foot in your homeland. Leave in peace that of others. Leave those unhappy Africans the scarce portion of goods that Heaven has bestowed on their land. Leave them in peace so that they can advance little by little along the road of civilization. Just because they are poor and ignorant, can you treat them worse than you would the beasts in the wilderness? They are poor and ignorant. But the same blood runs in their veins that runs in yours. The tears that their eyes shed are just like yours. Like you, they are parents, children, and siblings. Martyrs of Spanish patriotism! . . . From this day forward stop the *Spaniards* from going to the coast of Africa, where they surpass in cruelty and injustice those invaders that destroyed your soul. You, who know what it is to have [your families] ripped from your homes by foreign soldiers, leave to the father his children, and to the husband his wife.⁵

Blanco's demand that Spain exit Africa was an echo of Isidoro de Antillón's writings on the slave trade from the same period. Antillón was a geographer active in Madrid's learned societies before the French invasion. After 1808, he and Blanco worked together as editors of the Spanish government's official newspaper, the *Seminario patriótico*, before Blanco went into exile in 1810. Among his works was an anti-slave-trade tract that sought to demonstrate that the deregulated slave traffic was not only anomalous but also unnecessary when understood within the structure of the Spanish colonial empire. Antillón insisted in his work, originally written and publicly delivered in 1803 but printed for the first time in 1811, that Spain must ban the traffic and instead rely on the indigenous population of the colonies, which had grown considerably in the eighteenth century, as the backbone of the labor force.⁶ Antillón knew of course that this policy would have little appeal in Havana, because the indigenous population had virtually disappeared there, but to such objections he had a ready answer inspired by Toussaint Louverture during the Haitian Revolution: "There can be no doubt. The blacks will one day find a valiant leader who will avenge them and ensure their independence through force. And we must fear that finding the Crassus to this new Spartacus will not be easy."⁷

But security against a possible slave revolt was not the main thrust of Antillón's antislavery message. Rather, he viewed the turn toward the slave trade as a miscalculation that ignored the real strengths of Spanish colonial society. Antillón believed that Spain enjoyed considerable advantages over its French and British rivals because they relied too heavily on dangerous and unreliable enslaved African labor. The Saint-Domingue rebellion and the frequency of uprisings and maroonage in the British and French islands showed that the only way to stabilize tropical production in the rival empires would be by moving the plantations from the Antilles to Africa itself, where free laborers could be recruited. In contrast, Spain's American empire benefited from a large indigenous workforce. If Spain would effectively apply its own colonial legislation, the Laws of the Indies, then Indian workers would not only be more productive but also receive more just treatment from their employers and royal officials. Spain would thus take advantage of its superior human and institutional resources in its efforts to catch up to its rivals by effectively

⁵ Blanco White, *Bosquejo del comercio*, 195–96 (emphasis in original).

⁶ Isidoro de Antillón, *Disertación sobre el origen de la esclavitud de los negros, motivos que la han perpetuado, ventajas que se le atribuyen y medios que podrían adoptarse para hacer prosperar nuestras colonias sin la esclavitud de los negros* (Mallorca: Imprenta de Miguel Domingo, 1811), 67.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 75.

inverting their formulas, substituting Indian labor for African: “It is uncontested that in our Americas the Indians can take over the labor of the blacks, especially if they are treated with less harshness and arbitrariness than heretofore.”⁸ The message was clear: the prosperity and security of the Spanish Empire lay not in Africa but in the Americas.

RAFAEL MARÍA DE LABRA: ABOLITIONISM AND IMPERIALISM

In 1817, the restored Spanish monarch Ferdinand VII agreed to a treaty with the British government to ban the slave trade to the Spanish colonies. However, the Spanish government did little to enforce it and, on the ground in Cuba and Puerto Rico, actually encouraged the illegal trade, which spiked to new highs in the 1820s and 1830s. Though British initiatives and shifts in market conditions for sugar squeezed the trade in the 1840s and 1850s, by the time the US Civil War broke out the traffic to Cuba was surging anew. But new cooperation between Britain and the United States against slave trading spelled doom for the traffic. In 1867, the Spanish government finally abolished it effectively.⁹ Though Spanish abolitionists had spoken out against the slave trade in the early nineteenth century, proslavery interests, both in the metropole and in the colonies, had carried the day for several decades more.

The Civil War in the United States and the disruptions that it caused in the Spanish colonial system created the opportunities for new antislavery movements that exercised greater influence than the isolated criticisms of the early nineteenth century. In Cuba, the separatist uprising of 1868 adopted antislavery positions and freed many slaves in the zones of the island where the uprising was effective. In Spain, the Spanish Abolitionist Society, founded by Spanish and Puerto Rican reformers in Madrid in 1865, pushed for abolition in Cuba and Puerto Rico and after 1868 demanded increasingly radical action. Many believed that only immediate abolition would preserve Spanish rule in Cuba by undercutting the rebellion’s legitimacy and enhancing Spain’s image among the enslaved population. One of the most forceful advocates of this strategy was Rafael María de Labra, a young lawyer and abolitionist who was widely involved in Madrid’s reformist circles and connected to the nascent political parties in the colonies (he would represent Cuba and Puerto Rico in the Spanish Senate later in the century).

Labra wrote widely about the Spanish colonies, not only those in the Caribbean. Indeed, after the crisis of the slave system in Cuba, where a protracted abolition process finally came to a close in 1886, he was among those Spanish commentators who believed that the metropole needed to invest more seriously in its Pacific and African outposts. In part, Labra was consciously reflecting the imperialist politics of the era, noting that Spain lagged far behind its European neighbors in an era of aggressive expansion. Yet he was also reflecting interests in the peninsula that were shifting their investments away from the Caribbean colonies in search of safer returns. Capital from Cuba sought safe havens in Spain, the United States, and Britain, but there were also interest groups that demanded more effective exploitation of the other colonies.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 67, and see also 53–67. On Spanish debates over policy toward the indigenous population in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, see David Weber, *Bárbaros: Spaniards and Their Savages in the Age of Enlightenment* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2005). See also Josep M. Fradera, “Moments in a Postponed Abolition,” in Fradera and Schmidt-Nowara, *Slavery, Empire, and Abolitionism*. That Antillón first made these arguments in 1803 indicates that some Spaniards opposed the free traffic in slaves from the first moment, a history of opposition worth retrieving and reconsidering.

⁹ Arthur Corwin, *Spain and the Abolition of Slavery in Cuba, 1817–1886* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1967); and David R. Murray, *Odious Commerce: Britain, Spain and the Abolition of the Cuban Slave Trade* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980).

For example, Barcelona investors, some of whom with fortunes that originated in Cuba, were quite interested in promoting the development of the Philippines.¹⁰

Though Labra was not a businessman, he was certainly sensitive to the changes taking place in the Spanish colonial system because of the abolition of Cuban slavery. He fully endorsed greater involvement in the Pacific and African colonies. Unlike Blanco and Antillón, then, Labra favored colonization in the Spanish islands and the creation of a small Spanish enclave in Africa. He saw colonization in Africa as a way of boosting Spain's international presence and its prosperity in an era of intense rivalries and competition, an era in which Spain would not fare well.

However, like Blanco and Antillón, Labra called attention to Spain's weak presence in Africa and the futility of its colonizing efforts in the nineteenth century. During a renewed period of crisis in Cuba—the War of Independence that broke out in 1895—Labra spoke before the Spanish Cortes and then published a pamphlet about Spain's African settlements. He sketched the abandonment and neglect of the territories, making unfavorable comparisons to the Portuguese settlements in São Tomé and Príncipe. He urged the conquest and the forced settlement of the people of Fernando Po, the Bubi, and efforts to incorporate them into Spanish civilization. Doing so required immigration from the peninsula and a strong administrative and military presence to take over from the missionaries, who were practically the sole Spanish presence. But there was a whiff of despair about the projected undertaking, and one of the factors that provoked this sensation in Labra was indeed ignorance. Unlike Britain, France, and the Netherlands with their ample publications of colonial data, Spain's small quota of knowledge about Africa gathered dust in archives so that Spaniards knew nothing about their colonial possessions: “there in the Archive of the Ministry of Overseas Provinces, covered in dust and unknown by his countrymen and foreigners alike, keeping company with the unpublished *Diccionario del idioma de los bubis* written by the missionary Father Martínez Sanz in 1850, are the 12 thick volumes about Fernando Po edited by Sr. Pellón y Rodríguez some 25 years ago, a work truly worthy of esteem.”¹¹ Shortly thereafter, with the loss of Cuba, Spain's ignorance of its African colony would appear all the more dire to Labra and other Spaniards.

CONCLUSIONS: SPAIN, AFRICA, AND CUBA

Considering the questions raised by Lisa Surwillo about “the historiography of ignorance”¹² from the evidence gleaned from abolitionism, I would make the following points.

First, whether advocating distance from Africa like Blanco and Antillón or demanding more aggressive colonization like Labra, abolitionists called attention to the historic weakness of Spain's presence in Africa, especially when compared with other European empires.

Second, abolitionists did consistently raise the question of Spanish ignorance: Blanco and Antillón wanted to bring to light the violence of Spanish slaving in Africa in the early nineteenth century, and at the end of the century Labra drew a picture of useful knowledge moldering in the

¹⁰ See Martín Rodrigo y Alharilla, *Los marqueses de Comillas (1817–1925): Antonio y Claudio López* (Madrid: LID, 2000). This is a study of one of the most famous nineteenth-century *indianos*, Antonio López, and his complex business interests.

¹¹ Rafael María de Labra, “Las colonias españolas del Golfo de Guinea,” in *Cuestiones palpitantes de política, derecho y administración* (Madrid: Tipografía de A. Alonso, 1897), 424.

¹² At the conference “Treating the *Trata* after 1808: The Historiography of Ignorance and the Spanish Slave Trade,” organized by Lisa Surwillo and held at Stanford University on April 9–10, 2010.

colonial ministry's archive to illustrate how little Spaniards knew, or could know, about the colonies in the Gulf of Guinea.

Third, if Africa was unknown (for better or worse), *Africans* were clearly not absent from abolitionist concerns. But the abolitionists' focus was largely on *Cuba*. As one colonial minister, the Catalan Víctor Balaguer, whose pet project was the development of Spain's presence in the Philippines, lamented: "but then there is Cuba, Cuba, which since 1870 has monopolized all of the hours of the minister, taking control of him body and soul."¹³ The same could be said of the abolitionists throughout the nineteenth century: what preoccupied them was how to end the slave trade, how to abolish slavery, how to enfranchise freed slaves, and how to maintain control of the colony in the midst of slave emancipation and anticolonial warfare. This preoccupation with Cuba, the greatest slave society in Spanish colonial history, qualifies "the historiography of ignorance." Spain's way toward knowledge of Africa and Africans would lead not through the continent but through the island of Cuba. A

¹³ Quoted in Javier Morillo-Alicea, "Uncharted Landscapes of 'Latin America': The Philippines in the Spanish Imperial Archipelago," in *Interpreting Spanish Colonialism: Empires, Nations, and Legends*, ed. Christopher Schmidt-Nowara and John Nieto-Phillips (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2005), 32.