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Sugar, Slaves, and the Politics of Annexationism: Cuba, 1840-1855

ANTON L. ALLAHAR

In most discussions about sugar and slavery there has been a tendency to focus heavily on economics and to overlook politics. While this is somewhat understandable, given the more readily apparent or visible features of enslavement, deprivation, poverty, and the rigors of plantation life, it is not excusable. Even if sugar and slavery were in the first instance purely economic calculations, the fantastic fortunes realized on the basis of these twin undertakings soon led to a series of more or less protracted political rivalries between various European countries. To secure their vast economic fortunes and the potential for even greater accumulation, sugar and slaving interests formed political alliances and rivalries, supported and toppled governments, and were forced daily to deal with the sociopolitical implications of their economic enterprises.

Nowhere in the so-called New World were the politics of sugar and slavery more evident than in mid-nineteenth-century Cuba. Bearing in mind the fact that emancipation of the slaves in the British colonies was complete by 1838, and that the French were to follow suit in their colonial territories by 1848, the Spanish colonies of Santo Domingo, Puerto Rico, and Cuba were the principal foci of slave trading and slavery in the Caribbean.¹ Since Cuba was the largest and most prosperous of these three, its socioeconomic complex of sugar and slavery loomed largest; and as could be expected, the political aspects of that structure were most compelling.

After the period of easy expansion and rapid accumulation witnessed by the Cuban sugar industry in the first three decades of the nineteenth century² and after Cuba's slave population had risen to

¹ Portuguese Brazil also retained slavery until around 1890, but the Brazilian case lies beyond the scope of this paper.

² Anton L. Allahar, "The Cuban Sugar Planters, 1790-1820: 'The Most Solid and Brilliant Bourgeois Class in all of Latin America,'" *The Americas* 41 (1984):37-57.

unprecedented numbers, a crisis period was ushered in, owing to, among other things, an oversupply of sugar on the world market, ruinous competition from European beet producers, and the determination of the British to end slavery all over the world. These developments had a profound impact on the Cuban producers and *hacendados* (slave owners) whose political responses fell into three different categories.

The first response, which was most characteristic of a very tiny fraction of the wealthiest planters, who favored a move away from slave labor to wage labor, could be termed pro-Spanish. They had firm ties with Spain, with the crown, and with the established peninsular merchants and trading houses on the continent of Europe. They received favorable treatment from the colonial authorities and often considered Cuba just another province of Spain. As a group, their experiments with wage labor proved to be vastly more efficient and successful, facilitating the production of sugar using advanced technical means. However, they remained few in number and their political pro-Spanish voice was increasingly muted by other forces in the country. The second response, most common among small economic interests outside of sugar, which did not rely heavily on the ownership of slaves, could best be seen as independentist. Wishing to be free of Spain and all the colonial restrictions on trade and political freedoms that mother countries imposed on their colonies, they saw themselves as true Cuban patriots, opposed to big sugar business, to slavery, and to continued colonial dependence on Spain.

Finally, the third response, and the one with which this paper is most concerned, was that preferred by those Cuban-born, creole *hacendados azucareros* (sugar planters) whose financial resources, though substantial, did not permit them realistically to contemplate a move away from slave labor in the direction of greater modernization and mechanization of their enterprises. For this fraction of the planter class, annexation to the United States promised the surest guarantee against losing their considerable slave property, for it should be remembered, slavery continued in that country until the 1860s. The political thinking of this group, then, was that if Cuba could be annexed to the United States the laws governing slavery there would also apply to them, and the powerful American union would defend

them against any British moves to enforce emancipation of their slaves. This was the class that occupied political center stage in Cuba at the time.

Around the mid-nineteenth century, the tasks facing the Cuban *hacendados* with respect to the further development of the sugar industry were by no means simple. The earlier, formal abolition of the slave trade in 1820, and the scarcity of slaves resulting from the cholera epidemic of 1831-1833, and the high risks which plagued the illegal trade, combined to yield a tremendous increase in the cost of new slaves, making it far more practical and feasible to think in terms of a switch to wage labor. In practice, however, the realization of this conversion proved to be difficult owing to the vital presence of the *negreros* (slave traders) and the fact that the colonial authorities, as active co-conspirators in the continuing illegal slave trade, saw their interests as being closely tied in with those of the *negreros* and other merchants.³

By this time, owing largely to the earlier efforts of the harshly anti-creole Captain General Miguel Tacón, the creole *hacendados* had been deprived of much of their former economic and political freedom:

The complete dictatorial and despotic authority which Tacón exercised was incompatible with the existence of local semi-feudal realities and privileges enjoyed by creole landowners and planters. Tacón understood this and sought to break the power of this rich and aristocratic class of creoles.... In this regard his first measure was to deny them access to the Palace, the various ministries, and the court of law....⁴

In short, this group of planters was made to suffer a major reduction in importance, and came to experience marginalization in both the economic and political life of the country. While in the first three decades of the nineteenth century they were able to flourish in an

³ Hugh Thomas, *Cuba, or the Pursuit of Freedom* (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1971), 136-56; Raúl Cepero Bonilla, *Obras históricas* (Havana: Instituto de historia, 1963), 73.

⁴ Ramiro Guerra y Sánchez, *Manual de historia de Cuba* (Havana: Cultural S.A., 1938), 334-35.

almost unfettered manner, significant changes were introduced during and after the 1830s. In its heyday, Cuban society underwent great economic, political, social, and cultural changes, which were nourished by an incipient nationalism. The sugar barons developed economic institutions, constructed centers of higher learning, modernized the system of teaching, published books on a wide variety of topics, and introduced both the railroad and the newspaper medium.⁵

By the mid-1830s, amidst a growing tide of slave rebellions and creole demands for greater autonomy in local decision making, the Spanish crown, already reeling under the impact of the successful wars of independence waged by the mainland colonies, opted for a firmer but more cautious approach with respect to Cuban matters. Military surveillance was stepped up and the local or *criollo* planters, the bearers of "treacherous" nationalistic sentiments, were singled out for special attention. Their purge from positions of authority and social prestige began at the level of the *real junta de fomento* (Society for Progress), where the *criollos* had become entrenched, and from which positions they obtained an important voice in the administration of various affairs pertinent to the country as a whole. Following this, as Moreno Fragnals notes,⁶ they were violently weeded out of the *sociedad económica de amigos del país*, a very powerful economic association of the day. Nor was this all, for it was not long before the *Revista bimestre cubana*, the most significant organ of this group, was completely silenced. In a few years, the only power left to them remained in the seats of the local *cabildos* (town councils) which were themselves being relieved of any effective role in local government. In other words, there was a pronounced return to a more centralized system of government, which the *comerciantes* and *peninsulares* (Spanish-based interests) relished greatly.

When these developments are coupled with the serious economic problems that were being faced, a more integrated picture emerges of the plight of the local *hacendados*. It was not a time to be complacent, however, for there were serious threats to their survival: on the economic plane, there was competition for existing markets occasioned by the rise of beet production; on the political plane, the

⁵ Allahar, "The Cuban Sugar Planters," 37-57.

⁶ Manuel Moreno Fragnals, "Azúcar, esclavos y revolución (1790-1868)," *Casa de las Américas* 50 (September-October 1968):42.

burdens of high taxes imposed by the colonial government continued to mount; and on the social plane, there was growing pressure from the British to end slavery—the so-called racial threat of Africanization.

Therefore, it is in this context that the annexationist movement must be understood as a political strategy aimed at redressing the economic, political, and social problems of the planters. Although it appears on the surface that the political and social concerns were secondary to the economic, the planters were rightly convinced that the solution to their economic problems lay in a political strategy. Their aims were clear: to guard against the rapid advances of beet sugar the planters had to secure a market for their product. Hence, as part of the North American union, their sugar would be given preferential treatment and their slave property would be secure. Further, having once escaped the numerous tax levies imposed on them by the Spanish crown, and having rid themselves of the usurious practices of the Spanish merchants, their opportunities for greater accumulation of wealth would be increased. Finally, those questions related to abolition, conversion to wage labor, and the development of the technological forces in sugar production could then be deferred to a later time when either circumstances permitted or new crises made it mandatory that they be addressed.

By the early 1840s, when it finally dawned upon the *hacendados* that Spain was in no way prepared to entertain any further reformist demands on their part, and when their voice was silenced in the Cortes, a new political current began to take hold among the members of the *club de la Habana* where the wealthy planters usually met to discuss politics and business. This was the current of annexationism, which came to dominate the ideological thinking of the *hacendados* during the middle years of the nineteenth century, and only began to decline after 1855 with the political commotion in Spain. Among other things, the commotion was related to the effects of the Carlist Wars (1833-1876), the battles between the constitutionist and absolutist forces and the increasing military presence in government, the interference of both France and Great Britain in the internal affairs of Spain, the return to power of General Espartero, and the renewed soft stand on slavery under the captaincy general of José de la Concha, who replaced the pro-abolitionist Juan Marqués de la Pezuela y Caballos.

The idea of annexation was not new to the *hacendados*. In fact, ever since the early 1800s their conservative and reform politics, aimed at securing provincial status for Cuba, amounted to no more than demands for annexation to Spain. This political stand corresponded to the fact that their wealth was based on the ownership and exploitation of slave labor, and in view of the fear of a massive uprising to which this state of affairs gave rise, it was necessary to ensure the alien presence of the coercive colonial state and its repressive agents in the form of police and soldiers.

For these reasons, and owing to Spain's constant refusal to accord them any meaningful recognition, an important section of this group of planters came to abandon the idea of annexation to Spain, and set their sights instead on a union with the United States. Nevertheless, this move still could not be seen to have been a revolutionary one, but rather was akin to a continuation of the fundamentally conservative and anti-nationalist politics of the past. In other words, given the internal chaos in Spain and her generally weak position in the context of European politics of the period, the creole planters, instead of proposing the establishment of a sovereign nation with an independent state apparatus, chose to avoid a radical stand and opted for submission to government by the United States.

In view of the conditions under which they were operating, however, this was a very pragmatic move, for neither the United States, Britain, Spain, nor the slaves would have supported them: Spain's motives would have been obvious—it desired to retain control of Cuba; the United States did not want to risk a war with Spain and/or Britain; Britain, likewise, realized that if it supported the planters, Spain and the United States would be drawn closer together, and given Spain's general weakness, Cuba would soon pass into the hands of the latter; and finally, the slaves would not support a struggle which did not have their own liberation as a main goal. Hence, the pragmatic response was one of a possible peaceful annexation to the United States, with all its promises of economic prosperity.

This annexationist tendency on the part of the Cuban *hacendados* was not totally without support in the United States itself. In fact, since the turn of the century, the government of the United States had shown great interest in expanding its territory, be it by peaceful purchase (Louisiana, 1803; Florida, 1819) or through more bellicose actions such as were witnessed between the years 1830-1848, when

Texas and California, Arizona, Nevada, Utah, New Mexico, Colorado, and part of Wyoming all became part of the North American union. Given the political climate which spawned the Monroe Doctrine in 1823 and the whole ideology of "manifest destiny," however, the United States government did not at the time directly concern itself with the acquisition of Cuba. The dominant mode of thinking on the question of Cuba's incorporation into the Union was that espoused by Secretary of State John Quincy Adams in 1823, who reasoned that:

there are laws of political as well as physical gravitation; and if an apple severed by the tempest from its native tree cannot choose but fall to the ground, Cuba, forcibly disjointed from its own unnatural connection with Spain, and incapable of self-support, can gravitate only towards the North American union, which by the same law of nature cannot cast her off from its bosom.⁷

By the late 1840s, the fear that Cuba could be lost to the persistent British, or to some other kind of European alliance, led to the appearance of a more assertive Cuban policy on the part of the Americans. This was also the period during which the heightening of internal tensions and divisions between northern and southern interests within the United States served to throw into bold relief the question of the preservation of slavery, and consequently that of the incorporation of Cuba into the Union. Leading political figures and representatives of the southern slave interests, realizing the great advantage to be gained from the annexation of Cuba, entered the picture and began to campaign in this direction. Their arguments and propaganda activities ranged from the promotion of racial myths and ideologies, through sober calculations of Cuba's economic and commercial worth to the United States, to the fact that Cuba, because of its geographical location, was by natural right part of the territory of the Union. Thus, for example, James Dunwoody DeBow, a close friend of John Caldwell

⁷ John Quincy Adams, *Writings*, ed. Worthington Chauncey Ford, 7 vols. (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1913-17), 7:373.

Calhoun (United States secretary of war and also a champion of southern slavery), who edited the tremendously influential *DeBow's Review*, argued:

We have a destiny to perform, 'a manifest destiny' over all Mexico, over South America, over the West Indies and Canada. The Sandwich Islands are as necessary to our eastern, as are the isles of the Gulf to our western commerce.⁸

On the question of black/white relations, he was to add four years later that the resources of the tropical regions of the earth

...are to be finally and fully developed by that race which God in his mercy formed and created for just such regions.... Providence lots off the earth to its appropriate races...the black man loves to breathe the humid air of his native swamps, while the white man exults and bounds in the elastic air of his native hills. Where you can combine the administrative governing qualities of the one race together with the patient endurance and physical capacities of the other, you have the perfect system by which the vast tropical regions of the earth are to be developed.⁹

In addition to DeBow, there was John L. O'Sullivan, the man responsible for coining the phrase "manifest destiny," who was a political advisor to President James Polk, as well as the editor of the *New York Morning News* and the *United States Democratic Review*. Echoing sentiments similar to those of DeBow, O'Sullivan in 1852 wrote:

⁸ James Dunwoody DeBow, "The Late Cuba Expedition," *DeBow's Review* 9 (1850):167.

⁹ DeBow, "Destiny of the Slave States," *ibid.* 17 (1854):281-82.

This continent is for white people, and not only the continent, but the islands adjacent, and the negro must be kept in slavery at Cuba and Haiti, under white republican masters.¹⁰

Finally, to round out the picture of American thinking on the issue of Cuban annexation during the period, Moses Yale Beach, Latin American advisor to Polk and editor of the *New York Sun*, in his own way was also responsible for giving some kind of official direction to American annexationist plans. In an editorial in the *Sun* entitled "Cuba under the flag of the United States" which appeared on 23 July 1847, Beach wrote:

Cuba by geographical position, necessity and right belongs to the United States, it may and must be ours.... To us it is indispensable. We want its harbors for our ships to touch at to and from Mexico—for the accommodation of American and English transatlantic steamers—for its products and trade, and as the Grand key to the Gulf of Mexico. Give us Cuba, and our possessions are complete.¹¹

As political advisors, news commentators, and men of influence who had direct connections with the slaving interests in the southern United States and Cuba, such individuals had a keen desire to realize the annexation of Cuba. The official response of their government, however, was not as decisive, since the actual mechanics of securing this type of union implied the dismal prospect of having to support a war against Spain or Britain, which could conceivably be lost. Thus, convinced that Spain's decline as a colonial power would soon be complete, and that once this was accomplished Cuba would "naturally gravitate toward the United States," the American government adopted an official stance of friendship toward Spain and publicly denounced any use of force in bringing about the annexation of Cuba. To this end,

¹⁰ John L. O'Sullivan, "The Cuban Debate," *Democratic Review* 31 (1852):440.

¹¹ Quoted in Basil Rauch, *American Interest in Cuba: 1845-1855* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1948), 59.

it is appropriate to mention the entry in Polk's diary for 2 June 1848, after he was informed by the above-mentioned O'Sullivan of an American-assisted plot to stage the overthrow of Spanish rule in Cuba:

I at once said to Mr. O'Sullivan that if Cuba was ever obtained by the United States it must be by amicable purchase, and that as President of the United States I could give no countenance to such a step, and could not wink at such a movement.¹²

This position, however, ought not to be interpreted in terms of complete and total acquiescence on the part of the United States with respect to matters affecting Cuba. Indeed, given Spain's weakness, the American government was prepared to remain neutral only as long as no other foreign power intervened in the internal affairs of Cuba. The words of Polk are again instructive: "As long as Cuba remained in the possession of the present government (Spain), we would not object, but if a powerful foreign power was about to possess it, we would not permit it."¹³

Given the problems facing any further evolution of the sugar industry at the time during the 1840s, the question of annexation assumed great relevance to the very survival of the Cuban *hacendados*. As has been seen, this was a time when the planters became aware of the grave threat posed by the rise of beet production, and they also realized that significant changes in the structure and composition of the work force had to be effected. No longer could they continue to rest assured that their fortunes would be made and sustained via the maintenance and exploitation of a regime of slave labor, with all the negative implications which this carried. However, in the short run, lacking a sufficiently large, alternative pool of wage workers, and given the understandable opposition of the strong slaving interests, they avoided touching on the matter of abolition. This remained a sensitive issue—one which they would not have to address immediately if they

¹² James K. Polk, *The Diary of James K. Polk During his Presidency, 1845-1849*, ed. Milo Milton Quaife, 4 vols. (Chicago: A.C. McClurg Co., 1910), 3:476-77.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 1:71.

were able to secure annexation to the United States, where they hoped to find security for their slave property and protection from abolitionist crusaders.

Thus, the spread of annexationist sentiments throughout various regions of the country, and under different centers of control, was unmistakable. First of all, there was the *club de la Habana*, which, as the name suggests, comprised the most powerful *hacendados* of the Havana district. Under the leadership of such men as Cristóbal Madán (brother-in-law of John L. O'Sullivan), José Luis Alfonso, Francisco Frías y Jacot, and Miguel Aldama (whose palace was used as a meeting place for the conspirators), the members of the *club de la Habana* began negotiations with leading slave interests of the South in the United States, with a view to bringing about the goal of annexation. As a group which espoused a fundamentally conservative political position, the *hacendados habaneros* were themselves prepared to raise the funds (up to \$100 million) necessary for securing the annexation of Cuba to the United States¹⁴ rather than running the risk of falling into the hands of the British,¹⁵ who had already abolished slavery in their colonies:

This Havana-based annexationist group was essentially conservative in its actions...its plan was to avoid at all cost, any extreme recourse such as revolution or a long civil war which could conceivably lead to the destruction of their wealth and the rebellion of the slaves. And to this end they counted on the advice, cooperation and assistance from the annexationists in the southern United States.¹⁶

¹⁴ *Niles Weekly Register* 62 (31 July 1847):338.

¹⁵ It should be noted that around this time rumors were circulating to the effect that Britain was planning to seize the island in response to Spain's inability to pay the interest on securities held in England. See Eugene Irving McCormac, *James K. Polk: A Political Biography* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1922), 704; and Rauch, *American Interest in Cuba*, 60.

¹⁶ Guerra y Sánchez, *Manual de historia de Cuba*, 439.

A second and related pole of annexationist activity was centered in the city of New York, where a group of exiled Cubans under the leadership of Gaspar Betancourt Cisneros formed the *consejo cubano*,¹⁷ also dedicated to the cause of annexation. With strong links in Puerto Príncipe and Santiago de Cuba, this group, which also had some ties with the *club de la Habana*, founded the newspaper *La verdad* (published in both Spanish and English), and despite persecution and censorship, managed a wide clandestine distribution of their propaganda in Cuba. Under the editorship of Betancourt Cisneros, and significantly, of Cora Montgomery, the daughter of Moses Yale Beach of the *New York Sun*, *La verdad* soon became the chief propaganda organ of the movement, serving to cement even further the links between American and Cuban annexationists, and demonstrating an unswerving loyalty to the American people and their way of life. In an act of betrayal to the national sovereignty of Cuba, one editorial portrayed American imperialist expansionism (manifest destiny), as a "decree of Providence, which has placed Cuba in America, and in America a people who are charged with the mission of liberty, morality, civilization, and progress of all American nations."¹⁸

In addition to the *club de la Habana* and the *consejo cubano*, there was another more militant center of annexationist activity, with roots in the districts of Trinidad, Sancti Spíritus, and Cienfuegos, and in its later years (1849) also in New York: the *junta promovedora de los intereses políticos de Cuba*. Here the undisputed leader was the Venezuelan-born, ex-Spanish General Narciso López, who was related to two powerful planter families—the Iznagas (his uncle and co-conspirator was José María Sánchez Iznaga), and the powerful and eminent *hacendado* and journalist, Francisco Frías y Jacot, the count of Pozos Dulces (his brother-in-law).

¹⁷ By the early 1850s, when slavery in the United States itself was being strongly opposed and when interest in the annexationist cause began to wane, the *consejo cubano* was dissolved and in its stead there was created the *consejo de organización y gobierno cubano*. This new organization maintained strong links with the *club de la Habana*, and its membership and leadership embodied representation from the *club* and the old *consejo*. Men like José Ancieto Iznaga, Gaspar Betancourt Cisneros, Cristóbal Madán, and Victoriano Arrieta, though coming to the realization that annexation was no longer feasible, wished to use the *consejo* as a platform from which to continue seeking political reforms from Spain.

¹⁸ *La verdad*, 2a época, no. 23, 3 November 1848.

According to the particular account that one reads, López is presented either as a hero and martyr for Cuban independence,¹⁹ or as a traitor and annexationist *par excellence*;²⁰ but much of the historical documentation seems to favor the latter interpretation: This type of uncertainty, however, merely serves to reflect the vacillating position of the class which he came to represent in the later years of his life. With the fall of the first Espartero government in Spain in 1842 and when Captain General Valdés, his intimate friend, was relieved of his duties, López immediately fell into disfavor with the Spanish authorities, and was removed from his posts as governor of Trinidad and president of the military commission. From that day onward, he adopted a militant stand against Spain, and dedicated his energies toward the overthrow of Spanish rule in Cuba.

In reality, however, López's actions and his complicity with leading annexationist elements in the United States and their Cuban allies put him squarely in the camp of those who wished to sell the sovereignty of the Cuban nation to the Americans. There was no more telling proof of this assertion than his own words, uttered in his "Proclama a los habitantes de la isla de Cuba" (1850):

...the star of Cuba, today dull and trapped by the clouds of despotism, will shine more beautifully and brightly, if by chance it can be admitted with glory into the splendid North American constellation, where destiny leads it.²¹

As a political alternative to Spanish domination, annexation to the United States offered the *hacendados* a series of potential economic and civil freedoms. These were summed up by López in an interview with Secretary of War John Calhoun in 1849, when he submitted a

¹⁹ Herminio Portell Vilá, "Anexionismo," in *Cuadernos de historia habanera*, 23 vols. (Havana: Municipio de la Habana, 1943), 23:41-58; Emilio Roig de Leuchsenring, *La guerra libertadora cubana de los treinta años, 1868-1898. Razón de su victoria* (Havana: Oficina del historiador de la ciudad de la Habana, 1952).

²⁰ Sergio Aguirre, "Seis actitudes de la burguesía cubana en el siglo XIX," *Dialéctica* 2 (1943):153-77; Oscar Pino Santos, *Historia de Cuba: aspectos fundamentales* (Havana: Editorial nacional, 1964), 148-51.

²¹ Philip S. Foner, *Historia de Cuba y sus relaciones con Estados Unidos*, 2 vols. (Havana: Editorial de ciencias sociales, 1973), 2:64.

detailed list of grievances on behalf of the Cubans to a meeting of Calhoun and four United States senators. The list is discussed by John Francis Hamtramck Claiborne.²² It details the condition of life in the island, pointing to such things as the exclusion of the Cuban creoles from any share in the administration of public affairs, and even the denial of the expression of public opinion:

...there is no freedom of speech, of the press, or of occupation.... No native is allowed to hold any office, civil, judicial, military, or ecclesiastical; every place of honour, trust, or profit is confined to Spaniards. Cuba has no representative in the Spanish Cortes. She is literally governed by the sword.²³

This was probably one of the principal factors in the increasingly large gap between creoles and *peninsulares*, but for the moment the Spanish government seemed oblivious to the potentially disruptive consequences of such a rift, and the creoles, suffocated by the all-pervasive presence of the colonial regime, embraced the annexationist program with great zeal. Annexationism promised them a way out of their troubles, along with countless other benefits—a larger market for their products; considerably reduced transportation costs owing to proximity to the United States; lower import costs for consumer and producer goods, machinery, etc.; and tariff exemptions and tax breaks. As was to be expected, however, their paramount concern related to the question of the preservation of slavery, the great pillar upon which rested the entire superstructure of colonial exploitation and creole prosperity. With the British dead set in their efforts to rid the world of slavery, and given the growing inability of the Spanish government to resist their efforts in this direction, the *hacendados* viewed the question

²² John Francis Hamtramck Claiborne, *The Life and Correspondence of John A. Quitman, Major-General, USA, and Governor of the State of Mississippi*, 2 vols. (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1860), 2:53-62. Quitman, then the governor of Mississippi, was a former United States general with whom López had extensively discussed and planned the invasion of Cuba. An ambitious man and a liberal thinker, he was even offered the ultimate leadership of the revolutionary forces by López, but in the end, under pressure from his own government, combined with a feeling of obligation to honor his own people, he declined the offer, but continued to render unofficial support.

²³ *Ibid.*, 2:53-54.

of annexation to the United States, where slavery still flourished, with a certain sense of urgency. The mood of the day was well captured by Betancourt Cisneros in a letter to the very influential pro-independentist José Antonio Saco, dated 29 April 1849:

...the English cabinet asked several years ago that freedom be given to all those slaves introduced to Cuba since 1820; and since it is to be feared that this demand will be renewed, and that Spain will consent to it, the annexationist revolution is vital to our salvation.²⁴

The general sense of concern which moved Betancourt Cisneros to write this letter was heightened with the passage of time, and four years later the editors of *La verdad* were to write anxiously:

The abolition of the slave trade is not the greatest danger which threatens Cuba: another, which is more terrible, blackens its pure skies. The persistent and active British, who never stop once they get an opportunity to see their ideas through, convinced that Cuba will soon pass into the hands of the United States, and unable to prevent it, is pressing firmly to achieve, before such a development occurs, the emancipation of all the slaves.²⁵

On the political level, annexation also promised the possibility of sharing in, and maybe even transferring to Cuba, some of the democratic institutions evolved by the American people. This is a point which has been somewhat played down in the literature by such writers as Friedlaender (1944), Knight (1970), and Thomas (1971),²⁶ among several others, who argue generally that annexation was merely a

²⁴ José Antonio Saco, *Contra la anexión*, 2 vols. (Havana: Cultural S.A., 1928), 1:184-85.

²⁵ *La verdad*, año 6, no. 21, 30 August 1853.

²⁶ Heinrich E. Friedlaender, *Historia económica de Cuba* (Havana: Jesús Montero, 1944); Franklin Knight, *Slave Society in Cuba during the Nineteenth Century* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1970); and Thomas, *Cuba, or the Pursuit of Freedom*.

political solution to the economic ills of the *hacendados*, and more directly, a means of safeguarding their slave property. Though this may have been the case up to a point, it does not wholly represent the thinking of the planters and tends to mask certain secondary concerns inherent in the annexationist tendency.

Surely the maintenance of slavery, with all its contradictory features and consequences, was the prime motive of the planters, since, for the moment, there was no viable alternative source of labor, and since the huge sums of capital invested in their slave property did not even permit them to contemplate emancipation without very substantial compensation. However, on the other side of the coin, there were the economic and sociopolitical consequences of Spanish colonial domination. The former referred to the issue of trade monopolies, high tariffs, import restrictions, and duties, which bore heavily on the local planters, consumed much of their profits, guaranteed the continued dominance of the Spanish merchants, and in general limited their economic horizons. On this score, annexation to the United States promised to alleviate many of these economic burdens and hence appeared as an attractive alternative to their dependent colonial status.

The second question, which dealt with the social and political consequences of continued subordination to Spain, pointed to annexation as a possible solution to many of the problems being experienced by the planters. For the latter, the social and political institutions through which they were governed and subordinated appeared overly restrictive and exclusive in comparison to the democratic freedoms enjoyed by the citizens of the young, neighboring American republic. On this count, the idea of annexation, of becoming part of a "free" society, was given added support.

These two issues, economic and sociopolitical freedoms, tended to complement one another and fuel the fires of annexationism, and were used to combat the views of José Antonio Saco, the most outspoken of the anti-annexationists and a true champion of Cuban independence from Spain, who was consequently exiled to France in 1834 by Captain General Miguel Tacón. Saco was convinced that any political divisions within the ranks of the sugar planters would lead to an open split if annexation were to be achieved, with some fighting for the retention of slavery and others for abolition and democracy. And, in the ensuing commotion, he reasoned, the slaves would be able to

spark off their own war of liberation, which, given their numbers, would be successful and would result in the destruction and Africanization of Cuba.

Fearing the potentially divisive repercussions of Saco's observations, the editors of *La verdad* embarked upon a propaganda campaign to promote unity among themselves, while combating the views espoused by Saco in his *Ideas sobre la incorporación de Cuba en los Estados Unidos* (Paris: Panckoucke, 1848), and *Réplica de don José A. Saco a los anexionistas que han impugnado sus ideas sobre la incorporación de Cuba en los Estados Unidos* (Madrid: Imprenta de la compañía de impresores del reino, 1850). They wrote:

The annexationist party is unified in its motives for seeking incorporation into the United States. Some expect more, others less, in terms of realizing individual interests. The majority, however, see it as a political change which will secure their slave property. Others see it as a means of ending Spanish domination in a non-violent and gradual way.²⁷

It must not be assumed, however, that Saco's firm stand against annexation and his opposition to slavery sprang out of some kind of deep humanitarian concern for the slaves. To the contrary, his position was a clearly calculated one premised upon an extreme form of racial hatred toward the negro:

...it is exceedingly clear that what I desire *passionately*, not by violent or revolutionary means, but calmly and peacefully, is the *reduction*, the *extinction*, if it were possible, of the black race; and I desire it because on the American continent it can turn out to be the most powerful weapon for bringing about the ruin of our island.²⁸

²⁷ *La verdad*, 2a época, no. 30, 1 March 1849.

²⁸ Saco, *Contra la anexión*, 1:82. (Emphasis in original.)

Saco's racism stemmed from a deep-seated fear of a black uprising, which he reasoned would result from the courses of action advocated by men like Betancourt Cisneros, Madán, and López. Since Spain was in no way prepared to surrender Cuba to the British or the Americans, or sell her for the price offered (\$100 million), annexation could only come about by violent means. In the ensuing war, Spain would liberate the slaves and incorporate them into her army, as had been threatened, or the slaves would use their own initiative and liberate themselves once the chaos of war had been unleashed on the island. Either way, Cuba would be Africanized and lost to the whites forever. This was Saco's main preoccupation, and the one which drove him constantly to do battle with the annexationists—a battle which he fought all the way to his grave, to the point where he even composed his own epitaph, which reads:

*Aquí yace José Antonio Saco
Que no fué anexionista
Porque fué más Cubano
Que todos los anexionistas.*

Fearful that Saco's ideas might take hold and lead to divisions among the ranks of the annexationists, the editors of *La verdad* responded with a nine-point article, outlining the major reasons why there was no real cause for worry. In essence, they pointed to the fact that the slaves could not count on the support of the Spanish army, since the latter, "although they might be enemies of annexation, they are not enemies of their own race, and will not therefore afford the blacks such a criminal and inhuman support..."²⁹ In other words, they emphasized the question of racial identification, and argued that in the final analysis, racial unity would prevail over narrow sectional, class, or even national interests. In addition, the article also spoke of the guaranteed support of the American people, who

²⁹ *La verdad*, 2a época, no. 83, 12 June 1851.

...would come by the thousands to support the inalienable rights of Cuba, ensuring with their powerful and unselfish assistance, the complete security of freedom and property.³⁰

In this context, also, the words of Narciso López proved most comforting, as he tried to convince the *hacendados* that freedom for whites and slavery for blacks were not necessarily incompatible or irreconcilable. "Be not afraid, Cubans," he said, for

Domestic slavery is not unique to Cuba, nor is it incompatible with the freedom of citizens. Both ancient and modern history show this, and very close you have the example of the United States where three million slaves and servants do not interfere with the flourishing of the most liberal institutions in the world.³¹

In the meantime, undaunted by the attacks upon him, Saco continued to point out that the maintenance of slavery, which posed a tremendous potential danger to the entire social order, lay at the heart of the debate, in spite of the efforts of the *hacendados*, who tried to give the impression that Spanish domination, not slavery, was the main issue. In a letter to Saco on 30 August 1848, Betancourt Cisneros, chief editor of *La verdad*, wrote,

The Cuban annexationist party is strongly rooted in the United States. Even the abolitionists and the supporters of Free Soil Free Labor, see in annexation the quickest means of putting an end to the great humanitarian and social question. To tear the island away from Spain is to overcome virtually, the trade in human flesh.³²

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Vidal Morales y Morales, *Iniciadores y primeros mártires de la revolución cubana*, 3 vols. (Havana: Cultural S.A., 1931), 2:165.

³² Saco, *Contra la anexión*, 2:17.

And in another letter of 19 October 1848, the same author stated:

Annexation, my dear Saco, is not a sentiment, it is a *calculation*; even more—it is the overbearing law of necessity; it is the sacred right of self-preservation. Spain cannot *protect* us. Spain has to *sacrifice* us to the interests of Europe...Spain can make counts and marquises, courtiers and sycophants, but not free men.³³

In the first of these two extracts, the clear implication is that the *hacendados* were in some way interested in seeing an end to the slave trade (and maybe even slavery), but that this could only be realized after they had rid themselves of Spanish domination. The truth of the matter, however, was not that simple. In the first place, the question of the continuing trade, which was officially banned in 1820, was not one over which the *hacendados* had any say, since it was carried out illegally by the Spanish traders in complicity with the crown and the peninsular authorities. And in this respect, the most that they could do, albeit feebly, was to protest. On the other hand, their views regarding the actual institution of slavery were highly contradictory.

The preservation of slavery meant continued dependence on the slave merchants, further reliance on the Spanish crown for protection against a possible slave uprising, and greater limits to the development of the productive forces in sugar. Consequently, the planters opted for annexation to the United States with the intention of preserving slavery. Thus it appears that they were most concerned not with ending slavery *per se*, but rather with escaping merchant domination and control by the colonial state.

In this context it is possible to understand the second letter quoted above, where Betancourt Cisneros spoke of "calculation," "protection," and "sacrifice." If the *hacendados* were so sincere in their concern for the condition of the slaves, and if they made this concern known, why would they need "protection?" Against whom? Would the slaves not perceive them as allies in their common struggle for freedom? And to what does the term "sacrifice" refer, if not to the fact that the slaves, once freed, would be in a position to demand fair

³³ *Ibid.*, 2:25-27. (Emphasis added by the author.)

and equal treatment by the planters, hence spelling an end to their rapacious exploitation. Finally, to speak of annexation as a "calculation," as opposed to a "sentiment," surely implies that the pious concern for the slaves was but a guise for concealing certain fundamental and rooted economic and political aspirations, which could only be realized via the continued enslavement of blacks.

These questions serve to point out the contradictory and vacillating tendencies contained in the thinking of Betancourt Cisneros and the class he represented, and also serve to reveal the plight of the *hacendados*, who had by this time come to realize both the necessity and inevitability of the transition to wage labor. This point is clearly brought home in another letter written by Betancourt Cisneros to Saco on 3 April 1849, in which he refers to the African, Chinese, and Indian slaves/workers as *salvajes* (wild beasts), who had nothing to contribute to Cuba's future prosperity. In their place he preferred to see

Yankees, Irishmen, Germans, Frenchmen, Swedes, Belgians, devils and demons, but devils and demons that are white, intelligent, industrious, and besides have technological know-how, science, capital, and whatever else free men use to produce wealth.³⁴

If nothing else, this type of confession shows very clearly that the racism of the annexationists, though clear, was secondary to their class and economic concerns. But unlike Saco, whose negrophobia was related to the very real possibility that the blacks could rise up, seize their freedom, and overrun the country, they chose the conservative course when challenged by Saco to declare publicly their interest in "favor of slow and gradual emancipation."³⁵

The response from the editors of *La verdad* in "La cuestión negrera de la isla de Cuba," was as swift as it was predictable:

We do not wish, nor are we even able to think about slow and gradual emancipation, while Cuba and her sons depend on Spain, and are subject to the vacillations, narrowness, immorality and rapaciousness of the

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 2:38.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 1:177.

Spanish government...our patriotic conscience obliges us to present Cuba as a model worthy of imitation in such delicate matters, to the government of the United States.³⁶

This was the position in which the *hacendados anexionistas* sought refuge right up until the time when the movement visibly began to lose strength. When it finally ended, some important gains were made: annexation was not achieved, Spain managed to retain possession of the island, and slavery was temporarily preserved within the colonial framework. However, this victory came only at the last moment, when Spain decided on a more cautious strategy, and sought to introduce important reform measures related to the preservation of slavery in Cuba.

Reacting to pressures from Britain and France, the Spanish government had appointed Juan Marqués de la Pezuela y Caballos as captain general (December 1853-September 1854), in an earnest attempt to put an end to the slave trade and prepare the way for abolition. As Stanley Urban pointed out:

There were valid reasons why Spain should court England's favor by yielding or appearing to do so. One compelling argument was the English navy...would guarantee Spain continued possession of the Pearl of the Antilles.³⁷

Further, determined to make good its threat that "Cuba would either be Spanish or African," the colonial government decided to present a strong image to the planters, and a "militia of free blacks and mulattoes was directed to be organized throughout the island, which was put on an equal footing, with regard to privilege, with the regular army."³⁸ Meanwhile, Pezuela went about his job in a most thorough manner,

³⁶ Quoted in Raul Cepero Bonilla, *Obras históricas* (Havana: Instituto de historia, 1963), 57.

³⁷ C. Stanley Urban, "The Africanization of Cuba Scare, 1833-1855," *Hispanic American Historical Review* 37 (1957):33.

³⁸ John S. Thrasher, "Preliminary Essay," in Alexander Humboldt, *The Island of Cuba* (New York: Derby and Jackson, 1856), 71.

purging from the administration those *peninsulares* who conspired in the continuing illegal slave trade, promulgating laws which were aimed at securing the freedom of all slaves introduced into the island since 1820, as well as proposing the importation of free negro apprentices from Africa. The major thrust of the government's program was in the direction of doing away with slave labor and moving firmly towards an economy based on free, wage labor.³⁹

In addition, permission was secured for the arbitrary searching of plantations with the goal of freeing all slaves who were not properly registered, which in effect meant all those who had been brought in after 1820. As could be expected, this angered the annexationists, since they were still unable to find a substitute for slave labor on the plantations, and they continued to be excluded from any say in the government of the country.

Towards the end of 1854, when relations between Spain and Britain deteriorated to a low point, and when the external pressures for abolition were relaxed, the colonial government was able to act more freely, and seized the initiative from the annexationists, both in Cuba and the United States. Pezuela was replaced with the more tolerant José de la Concha, whose arrival in Havana was greeted by great festivities and tremendous cheers from *hacendados* and slave traders alike.⁴⁰ Almost immediately the harsh regulations against the illegal slave trade were relaxed, and the island "could consider itself secure and all property perfectly protected. Given such circumstances, an overall conservative outlook once more became dominant within the ranks of the planter class."⁴¹

In sum, the economic situation of the planters was no better in 1855 than it was in 1834. As a matter of fact, it had deteriorated relative to the continued advance of beet sugar sales on the world market.⁴² Their political strategy of annexationism had paid off to the extent that slavery remained intact; but their hope of becoming incorporated as an economic member-state within the great North

³⁹ Guerra y Sánchez, *Manual de historia de Cuba*, 504-9.

⁴⁰ Urban, "The Africanization of Cuba Scare," 41.

⁴¹ Guerra y Sánchez, *Manual de historia de Cuba*, 452.

⁴² Anton L. Allahar, "Merchants, Planters, and Merchants-become-Planters: Cuba, 1820-1868," *Canadian Journal of Latin American and Caribbean Studies* 10 (1985):73-93.

American union was not fulfilled. But if the Cuban planters and producers were to survive as competitors on the international market, a new economic and political strategy had to be devised—a strategy which redefined the terms of colonial subordination and/or restructured the philosophy and practice of sugar production within the colonial framework, and very importantly, one which laid the foundations for emancipation and the conversion to wage labor.