

Latin American Community And Slavery: The relationship between the Libertarian Project of the Americas and the institution of slavery in New York City. 1820-1835

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Latin America and the independence movement

The space occupied in history by the Latin American revolution that would attempt, once and for all, to make those living on its land completely free – if not morally, at least physically- from the oppression of the Spanish monarchical project of Charles IV was one of the most significant events of the beginning of the XIX century. A bloody and exhausting process, but one necessary for the collective of people who shared not only the ties created by their adoptive mother-tongue, but equally by a geographical space that had suffered the cruelest violations at the hands of its conquistadors. Enslaved by a world where they neither belonged, nor were considered strangers, the Latin American men and women of 1808 unanimously agreed to a communal agenda: the new century would see them emerge free and continue their path towards building a world of their own.

Taking advantage of the historical moment that would mark Spain's protest against their sovereign, the countries of Latin America -and the leaders behind the many revolutions

that would inundate the next two decades- had the clarity of mind to affirm their right to a new order. Countries now formed by people of different races and social status, most of them with ties visible and invisible not only to the European newcomers but to the Africans that unwillingly inundated their countries, all agreed on their irrefutable right to a life with dignity. This life, consequently, must be theirs and theirs alone.

It must surprise few people that the libertarian wars being fought at home in Central America and the South cone of the continent had been mostly orchestrated from a far. One of the epicenters of conspiracy, power struggle and academic study would inevitably be the vibrant and metropolitan New York City of the turn of the century. Already a hub for political thought, economic prosperity and migrant opportunity, New York City in the 1800s would offer the conditions required to brew the ultimate revolt. As it was impossible to freely discuss those matters which would conduce to the uprising of populations against their political institutions, it was logical to find a terrain that could offer not only the intellectual stimulus necessary for a campaign of this magnitude, but also the tranquility associated with this heaven for thought. New York City participated as well in the triangular formation that connected Europe and the lesser Americas, and remained of vital importance as part of the merchant routes of the next fifty years.

1820 and the Rebellions of Latin America.

Ricardo Perez Monfort, scholar of the Colegio de Mexico, describes the revolutions of Latin America in the Newspaper for Latin American Studies with six chapters that illustrate the chaos that the wake of the French Revolution of 1789 had left behind and the response by the Latin American people to the European catharsis that followed. Over thirteen million people in Latin America would be witnesses to the declaration of freedom of their own country between the last two decades of the 1700s and the first two of the 1800s. Organized by Viceroyalties, the groups that would participate in the revolutionary waves would include: Venezuela, Colombia, Panama and Ecuador as the Viceroyalty of Nueva Granada; Peru; Argentina, Uruguay, Paraguay, Bolivia and part of

Brazil in the Viceroyalty of Rio de la Plata; the Kingdom of Brazil; and the Caribbean, Mexico, Texas, Louisiana, Florida, California and Central America as the Viceroyalty of New Spain.

The rebellions that would take place in this vast territory were soon accompanied by the indigenous revolutions of the same geographical areas.

With the exception of Puerto Rico and Cuba by 1825 all of Latin America had been liberated from the tyranny of Spain.

1827 and Emancipation

Even though the New York Manumission Society had been at work for most of four decades, it was finally the year 1827 when New York could claim the abolition of slavery and a solid reform plan that could alleviate the suffering and offer aid to the enslaved population of New York soon to be released. A process so complex could only effectively come to bear fruit if it was carried out slowly, not because the people participating in it wanted it to be so, but because the conditions established by the brutal practice of possession of a human soul necessitates a healing process that should cover not only the directly affected but also his descendants, the society members that share his space, the laws of the country they inhabit and ultimately the collective consciousness of those who, for centuries, had applauded and supported the practice. With the international Slave Trade already prohibited, and the freedom of almost one third of the population insured in different ways (as soldiers; by masters; through birth), the new challenge would be to counter the effects on the agricultural and hence economic dimensions of the State. New York's elite at the time, most of them slave owners in their own right or by inheritance, have started to proclaim the rights of all people to live free. This condition by itself did little more than open up a conversation towards a future emancipation and it would still take a generous amount of heavy work to see a definite end to the road of slavery. Once freedom was reached, however, the New York City's scene did not change overnight. It was in this moment of intense

change where the most vulnerable would be seen under a new light: African slaves and Latin people would share the spotlight of this moment.

The nineteenth century was offering, without intending to do so, a comparative model of these two groups –sometimes closely intertwined, others completely distant- oppressed by the rulers of a territory that was now rightfully theirs. The colonial characteristics of the Latin American countries and the enslaved peoples of the African continent, both of them by this point not mere participants but examples as well of mestizaje, cultural and language appropriation, had more in common than they would initially be prepared to admit.

None of the two groups would emerge from the 1800s unscathed, yet both would be on their feet and ready for the challenges the global phenomenon of the twentieth century would offer.

Felix Varela and the Cuban Revolution

One of the most prominent characters of this period was perhaps the Catholic Cuban Priest Felix Varela who arrived in New York City in 1823 from Spain. Varela, a human rights advocate and an instrumental figure in the libertarian process of the island of Cuba, which was still decades behind the course of its brother nations, quickly became a protector of the poor and poor-immigrants of New York City. From the Church of the Transfiguration he served the community that most desperately needed him.

Apart from his duties as a priest of a heterogeneous and interracial congregation in one of the most dangerous and impoverished corners of the city (Five Points) the priest engaged in intense political activism. One of his most important contributions to the revolution of Cuba would be done through his journalistic ventures amongst many other publications. His sermons, books and letters, together with the editorials presented by

El Habanero –the newspaper he had founded- spoke of the intense desire to see Cuba as a free land.

Catholic Church in New York City

Five Points and the poor of Manhattan

1823 and El Habanero

Although a newspaper published in Philadelphia and later New York City, the seven editions of El Habanero exclusively intended to secretly reach the revolutionary forces living in the shadows in Cuba. El Habanero then became an important representation of the clergy's influence over the political structure of the island, as well as a connection between the community living abroad in exile and the citizens waiting for change.

Little did the newspaper do to represent Manhattan, its citizens, the legal and social polemic of the time or any other pressing matters that could only be of interest to the citizens of the United States. However, by examining its contents one could sense the intoxication possible by the moment the city was confronting. To deny the influence of the city on those who wrote for their audience back home would be to ignore that the world was becoming –thanks to the power of the press- an interconnected tangled web capable of a domino effect.

1828 Mercurio de Nueva York and the Latin American elite

The second, and an equally important periodical publication of this time, arrived in the year 1828 when Mercurio de Nueva York set its goal on keeping the Spanish speaking population connected with the rest of the world through the revision and translation of newspapers obtained from countries all over the Western world and on occasion the East. An elegant publication with a sophisticated audience, Mercurio is unique in laying before us an image of the literate Hispanic of Manhattan of 1820.

Exerpts. Mercurio de Nueva York. New York Public library. Media: Microfilm.

- “The religion of the Colombians continues to be the Catholic, Apostolic and Roman; nonetheless, and happily for the future prosperity of the Republic, the law does not prohibit in any way the practice of any other religion or belief. The towns educated under the inquisition and the colonial system should be illustrated little by little on the real directive of the Testament and Christian charity. A bigger part of the population now does not hate those who follow a different dogma to that of the Catholic Church. The Revolution and the government that directs it should maintain its focus on the respect and obedience of every one of its citizens.”

- “Baltimore, December 17. The Skip-Jack has arrived at the port today after having pursued and arrested this morning a Spanish ship with 300 black slaves. Once on port the slaves have all escaped but one however the archives and other paperwork have been happily recovered and will help with its identification.”

- “It is now almost certain that animal food is not necessary to maintain the strength and health of the human body.”

- “The founders of our constitution of government did not only stay away from incorporating with the State a determined religious mandate, but they also removed the legislative right from Congress to establish a specific religion.”
- “Civil freedom is incompatible with the establishment of a church.”
- “Periodical publications are expected to grow together with the commerce and population of the city where they are published. It is because of this that London and Paris in Europe and New York City in America publish more than any other city in these continents.”
- On a plantation by a worker “Are there blacks or colored working the land? Almost all workers are black and very few colored. The last ones work as administrators./ Is the work forced or enslaved labor? Forced labor without a doubt, according to what the rural code dictates.”
- “Is the whip being used on women? I can’t say it is used on women but men are definitely disciplined with the whip.”
- “Plantation of The Cayos being sold, which at some point counted 2000 slaves.
- “Rebellion in Haiti. It is a miracle that the blacks of the island had appeared calm until now when the whites of Colombia, Guatemala and other countries of the American continent have suffered so many revolutions. However finally Haiti has finally been infected by them.”

- “Puerto principe, which in another time was one of the most flourishing cities of the Western Hemisphere, is today in a state of absolute desolation. The poverty and misery that reign in their actual condition are convincing proof of the effects of the work of the freed in the colonies.”
- “Martinica. Slaves have revolted today in the market place. Two have escaped after the confrontation but later apprehended behind the bazaar.”
- “Correspondence of the Foreign Powers about the commerce of slaves presented to the English Parliament on May 19, 1829.” Continued regarding the condition of Sierra Leon.
- “A new country has been found inhabited by cannibals, this territory has been named “Land of Slaves”.”
- “Lord Eldon. This Sir has received letters from all over and presents too, due to his firm opposition to the emancipation of the Catholics.”

Sugar refineries in New York

Intimately connected by the sugar trade industry that dominated Manhattan during this time, Cuban and Puerto Rican sugar cane plantations and New York City’s refineries presented one of the most transparent examples of the complications tied to the institution of slavery and the people of Latin America. Where talk of emancipation and

abolition was a technical and soon absolute reality in the North, those same institutions profited from enslaved work in the plantation of the South that supplied their raw material. Where the North seemed invested in a process that could showcase their advancement towards a more just and refined society, the South continue imprisoned by those same characters... yet far from their sight their pain could continue to go unnoticed.

It would not be year 1886 –the decade preceding the time of Jose Marti and the Cuban Revolution- that the story of slavery would finally close its curtain to the African enslaved people of America. Shortly after, in 1895, the last colonial territory of the Latin America declared its independence from Spain. Black and Hispanic, sharing again a historical moment that would define them from then on.

The manuscripts stored throughout the city of New York have not revealed the secrets that lied within them yet... nonetheless it suffices to imagine we that Hispanics and black, poor and rich, immigrant and freed slaves all joined together in praise for the new road before them.

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