

# (Post-)colonial Archipelagos



Comparing the Legacies  
of Spanish Colonialism in Cuba,  
Puerto Rico, and the Philippines

Hans-Jürgen Burchardt  
and Johanna Leinius, Editors

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EDITED BY HANS-JÜRGEN BURCHARDT  
AND JOHANNA LEINIUS

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## CHAPTER 4

# Spain in Cuba

### *Policies, Structures, Economic Practices, and Colonial Relations*

Antonio Santamaría García

The Spanish colonial regime in Cuba was altered at the end of the 18th century and augured great economic growth based on export agriculture and the slave trade, which worked in line with the interests of the elite island producers. However, Spain lacked a market for the Cuban supply, thus leading the regime to support itself through business relations between the island's and metropole's elites and through the extraction of the territory's revenue. This system (considered anachronistic due to its divergence from the British model, though its conditions were different as well) lasted 140 years and obtained a level of economic expansion unequalled in the English dominions. The following pages will present an analysis of the elements that constituted this system and an explanation of how, with time, the aforementioned harmony of Spanish-Cuban interests weakened due to the crisis of slavery and the concentration of colonial trade in the United States, factors that contributed to the end of Spanish rule.

#### Colonial Relations, Slavery, and Sugar Production in Cuba

Traditionally, Cuba's tobacco trade and supply, its principal export, were under metropolitan monopoly control. The island was considered strategic for the defense of the Spanish American Empire. The West Indies Fleet

convened in Havana before returning to Europe, for which it was accorded a *situado* (remittance issued to sustain the colony) from the capital of the viceroyalty of New Spain, on which it depended (Fuente 2009).

In other Caribbean islands, commercial sugar production had progressed since 1640 through the use of slave labor, and Cuba planned to follow this example, considering that sugar was already produced in the Havana region thanks to reforms dating from the end of the 18th century that commercialized the land, but this region's growth required the deregulation of trade and slavery given the population shortage at that time (171,600 people in 1770–74, with 1,805,000 in 1890–94 following the introduction of at least 600,000 slaves; see fig. 4.1).

The modification of the colonial system in Cuba was the result of a series of events. In 1762, the British invaded Havana, and, upon recapturing it, the Spanish Crown created policies that would ensure that the island would be self-financed and would improve its defenses. The cornerstones of these policies were to outfit Havana with its own treasury and deregulate commerce and the African slave trade, including trade with friendly countries, authorized during the United States' independence (1775–83) and prolonged de jure or de facto due to the need to provide the territory with provisions, which the West Indies Fleet no longer guaranteed, and to export its products (Amores 2005).

Once independent from Great Britain, the United States stopped importing goods from British territories. Cuba's supply profited from this as well as from a market that Haiti ceased to supply and the slave trade that was no longer directed to the former French colony after its revolution (1791). The producing elite of the island thus formulated a project to take advantage of these opportunities, to expand the policies initiated in 1762 and enhance its participation in decision-making, which resulted in the creation of institutions like the Sociedad Económica (1784) and the Consulado de Comercio y Junta de Agricultura (1792), advisory organizations that also exercised authority over trade and the boosting of production and infrastructure development (Vázquez and Santamaría 2012).

The colonial reforms were a necessary condition for Cuba's economic growth. Its real gross domestic product (GDP) per capita increased 6.5% annually between 1775 and 1850, while Mexico's increased only 0.5% (Santamaría 2011). The sufficient condition, however, was the business abilities of the elites, especially those in Havana, who focused on agriculture (due to the island's lack of minerals, as in other parts of the Americas) and on founding a metropolitan trade monopoly. These elites benefited from the

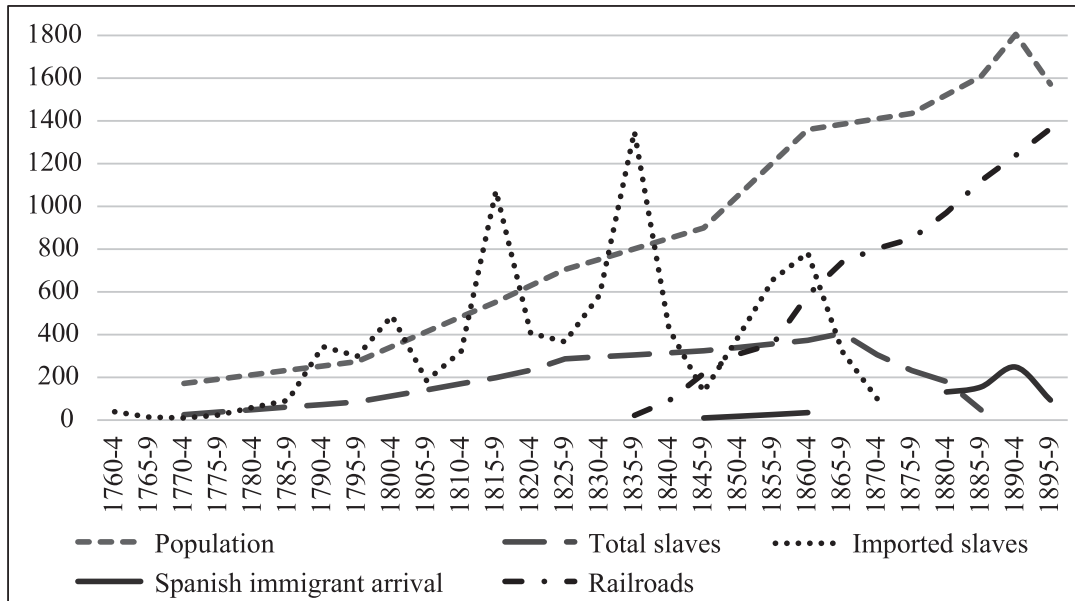


Fig. 4.1. Population and total slaves in Cuba (in thousands), imported slaves, immigrant arrivals (in hundreds) and railroads (in thousands of miles) (five-year averages)

Source: Adapted from Pérez de la Riva (1987); Zanetti and García-Álvarez (1987); Maluquer (1992); Santamaría and García-Álvarez (2004).

privilege accorded to the city's cabildo to rent out land until 1729, at the demand of the army and fleet, which enabled them to accumulate land and capital from the remittances they received and from official permissiveness regarding exportations that weren't approved by the Spanish treasury and to control the tobacco supply (also acquired with the remittance money) (Santamaría and García Álvarez 2004).

The series of events and policies that favored Cuba's growth continued into the 19th century. Napoleon invaded Spain in 1808, and independence began in its American empire. Although the island's agricultural and commercial elites debated over how to proceed, they remained loyal to the metropole. The island's economic progress and the possibility that political changes would halt it or lead to unrest within its growing African population (like that which took place in Haiti) help to explain this decision. Furthermore, Great Britain abolished the slave trade in 1808 and slavery in 1838, which damaged their sugar supply and benefited Cuba's (see fig. 4.2), which surpassed that of the English Caribbean around 1845.

The Latin American independence movements resulted in the strengthening of Cuba's previously implemented reforms in 1818. Cuba decisively deregulated its foreign trade and perpetuated its slave trade, despite the

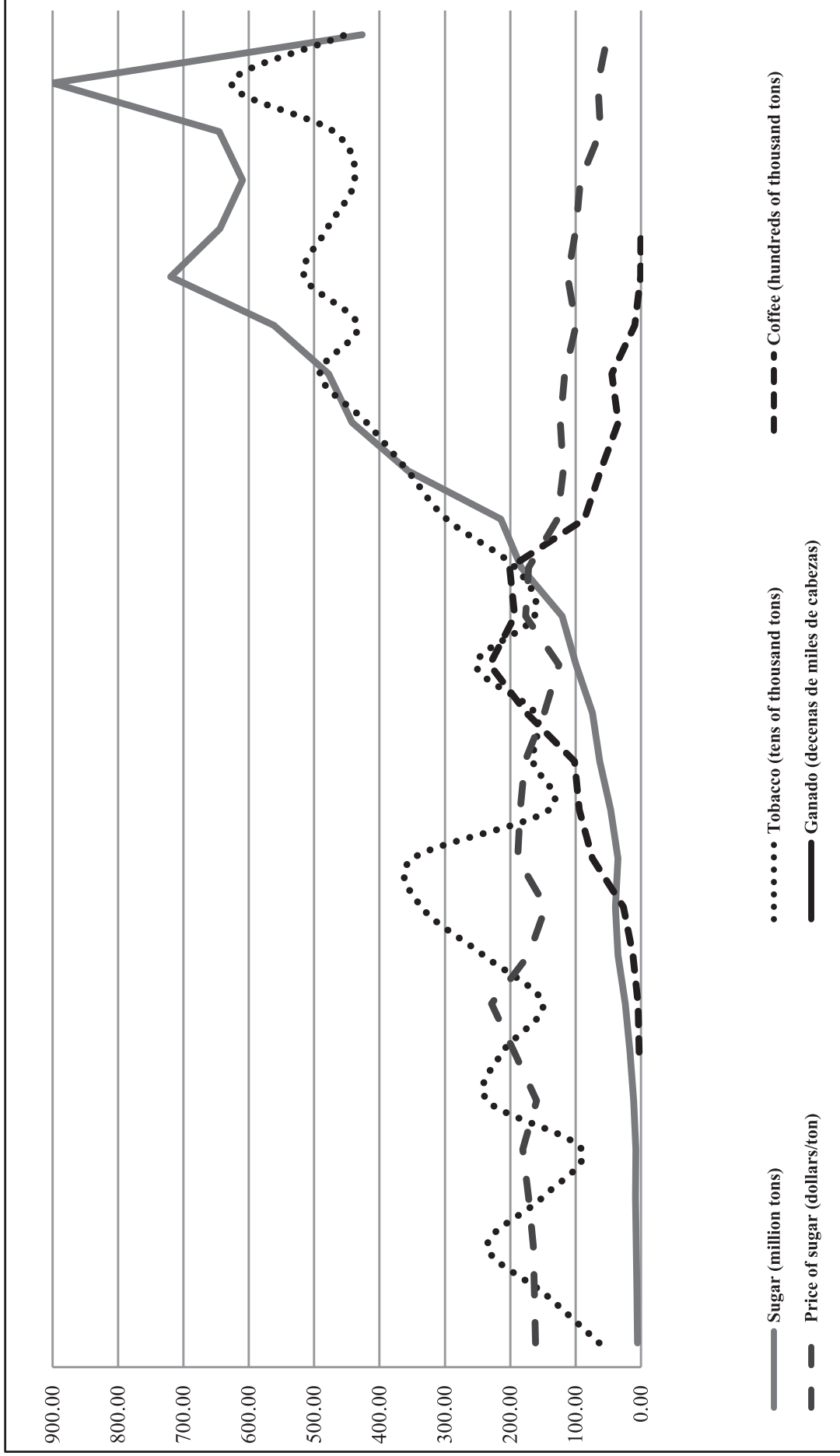


Fig. 4.2. Supply of sugar, coffee, tobacco, and livestock in Cuba and the price of sugar (five-year averages)  
 Source: Adapted from Moreno-Fraginals (1978); Stubbs (1989); Santamaría and García-Álvarez (2004); García-Álvarez (2015)

fact that the Spain and British governments signed a treaty prohibiting the slave trade in 1815. And, as these policies aimed to incentivize the growth of the island's economy, which was based on its exportations (given that the metropole lacked the market for them and that the reason for having colonies is to exploit them), a tax system was established on the island that protected importations from the mother country through tariffs, levied tariffs on all commercial trade, and favored the transportation of goods on national ships (Roldán 1997).

The extraction of Cuba's fiscal revenue was established by tariff laws in 1822, which would remain essentially unaltered until the end of Spanish rule on the island. However, belying the enduring nature of this fiscal system, a number of factors would ultimately lead to the demise of Spain's dominion. First was the need for slaves to maintain its economic growth, given the limited population on the island. Second was the cover offered through Cuba's colonial status that enabled it to continue the slave trade, which lasted until 1872 thanks to British-American conflict in the Caribbean, a balance of powers that allowed Cuba to remain in Spanish hands. The protraction of a slave-based social order was further guaranteed by the stationing of the metropolitan army on the island. These features, which determined the island's economic and social structure, also explain how the political position attained by the elites around 1790 would ultimately be undermined.

#### The Beginning of the Slavery Crisis, the Extraction of Colonial Revenue, and Cuba-Spain Ties

In the absence of market ties and given that the elite producers were Creoles, colonial relations in Cuba were based on the previously cited factors: free trade, the extraction of fiscal revenue, the maintenance of the slave trade, and shared trade between the island and metropolitan elite (Cayuela 1993). The alignment of interests that modified this relationship, however, progressively deteriorated at the same time as processes were modifying sugar production and markets. The end of the slave trade in Great Britain increased pressure to put an end to the practice, and the prohibition against it in Spain was toughened, albeit briefly, in 1845. In the end, the economic-strategic criteria that had previously permitted the perpetuation of slavery prevailed, though at the cost of a steep rise in the price of Africans.

The escalating cost of slaves led to their concentration in Cuba in the business that was most profitable: sugar cane plantations. Additionally, to

counteract this cost and the rising competition resulting from Europe's progress in the manufacturing of beet sugar following the Napoleonic Wars, sugar mills were mechanized and, in the west of the island, where the greatest concentration of factories was found (Cantero [1856–57] 2005), railways were constructed beginning in 1837, which would come to span 2,225 kilometers by 1898 (see fig. 4.1).

The difficulties involved in the slave trade—the high cost of slaves, the railway's reach, and the modernization of the factories—led to increasingly pooled resources in these endeavors and in the west of Cuba. This ended up damaging the supply of goods that were formerly favored by the very policies that backed their expansion. Coffee, which was grown in the island's east and west and whose production had increased since the 1790s, was particularly affected. It would end up attaining the same value as sugar, but, due to the aforementioned conditions and the increase in international competition, it crashed in the 1840s and was unable to recover (García Álvarez 2015). On the other hand, the cultivation and trade of tobacco survived, thanks to internal consumption, an external demand for Havanas, and the fact that it required less capital and fewer slaves and occupied space unsuitable for sugarcane (Stubbs 1989).

Other supply sectors that subsisted included stockbreeding, since it was needed as a food source; farming and the transportation of agricultural products (see fig. 4.2); copper mining and the banana plantations, which were limited to small regions; and foodstuffs for the population and the plantations, although these necessities were covered by the growing importation of food products (Le Riverend 1985; Santamaría and García Álvarez 2004).

Since the 1840s, Cuba's economy specialized in supplying sugar, and its territorial imbalances worsened. In the 1800s, the eastern half of the island was home to only 25% of the population, and production, trade, and the railways were concentrated in the west, which reduced relative agricultural diversification in the period 1790–1840. Additionally, the protection of the sugar beet industry in Europe led to the concentration of the island's confectionery sugar exports in the United States (30% in 1850, 70% in 1870, and 80% in 1880), which would effectively confer decisive power over the exports to a foreign country, something that was impossible to predict at the time of the reformation of colonial relations, and which, in 1854, gave rise to an increase in sugar tariffs in retaliation to tariffs applied to US flour sent to the Great Antilla (Moreno-Fraginals 1978).

The processes mentioned above occurred when the old regime gave way

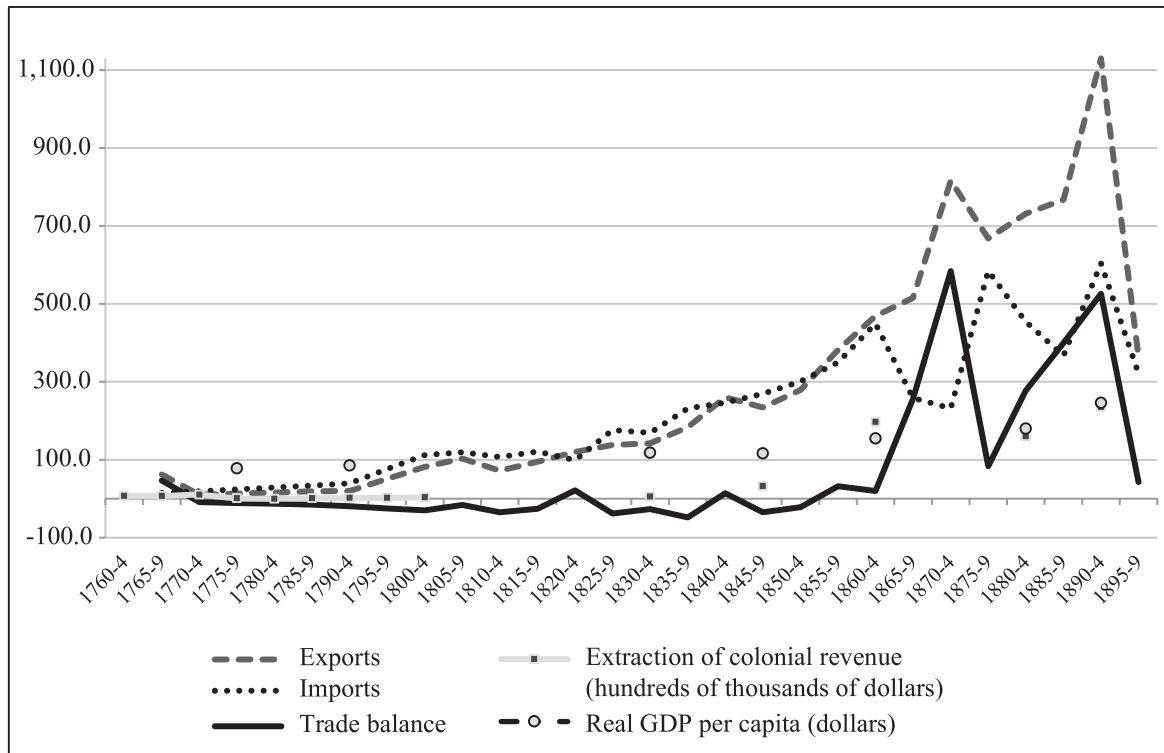


Fig. 4.3. Exports, imports, trade balance, the extraction of colonial revenue, and the real GDP per capita in Cuba (five-year averages)

Source: Data from Santamaría (2011); Maluquer (1974); Roldán (1997).

to liberal governments in Spain, whose plan was to increase Cuba's contribution to its development through a higher tax burden (see fig. 4.3) and to recuperate power that had been ceded to its elites during the time of the colonial reforms. These elites had grown old or died and had not passed on their investment habits to their descendants, whereas the metropolitan immigrants working in commercial and slave trade, though they continued their association with the Creole trade oligarchy, inherited economic hegemony over it (Bahamonde and Cayuela 1992). This was made evident by their acceptance that the constitution approved by the Courts of Madrid in 1837 would not apply to the Great Antilla and that the territory would remain under the rule of a general with plenipotentiary capacities (Gonzalves 2008). The reason for this decision was based on slavery and meant that the Cuban population was not given the same rights as the Spanish.

This greater fiscal pressure led to a rise in the revenue that Spain extracted from Cuba—from 2.7% to 3.3% of its GDP between 1840 and 1870—but since GDP increased 33% during the same period, the drain of wealth did not lead to any conflicts as long as the economy maintained its



upward trend and slavery did not reach a point of crisis. However, these same reasons paved the way for the political inaction that played out in response to progressive demands for reform on the island, despite the fact that recessions in 1857 and 1866 diminished its growth. This, along with the outflow of resources by way of taxes and the commercial imbalance with the metropole (Maluquer 1974; Roldán 1997), led to problems in raising the necessary investment to modernize its factories. Additionally, the colonial tariff negatively affected trade with the United States, and the country's abolition of slavery following its Civil War (1861–65) foretold the demise of slavery in the Great Antilla.

#### The Beginning of Colonial Crisis: Cuba without Slaves, Spain, and the United States

Following the abolition of slavery in the United States, a committee was convened in Madrid to address its economic problems of Cuba and the equalization of rights to those of Spain. In the end, it yielded no results besides the implementation of a new tax on the island. This, along with the reformist colonial movement's participation in the revolution that abolished the Spanish monarchy in 1868, helps to explain the outbreak of a war of independence in the Great Antilla in 1868 (Santamaría and García Álvarez 2004). Territorial imbalances were an additional factor contributing to the outbreak, since the conflict started in the east and was restricted at the western half of its territory.

With the war began the abolition of slavery in Cuba. The rebels proclaimed abolition in the territories they controlled, and the government responded with free womb laws, emancipation of the elderly, and emancipation of those who served in the army; the slave trade came to an end in 1872. The conflict lasted until 1878, and, although the majority of Creole elites supported and funded the metropole, this reinforced Spanish power on the island through the transfer of seized goods to the rebels, leading to immigration from the motherland that Hispanicized colonial society (Naranjo and García González 1996), since Cuba remained underpopulated and the end of slavery led to the need to import other workers (see fig. 4.1).

The Ten Years' War (1868–78) caused inflation, since money was minted to finance it, and an enormous public debt emitted by a bank set up in Spain was dumped on Cuba's treasury. Inflation ended only after the Bourbons were restored to power in the monarchy (1874) and the prom-

ised reforms were thwarted in 1866. In exchange for these reforms, abolition was declared (without reparations), and, in 1866, slavery ended in the Great Antilla, which promoted the equalization of rights in the island to those of the metropole. Liberty of association, freedom of the press, and the creation of political parties were declared; elections were held; and colonial representatives were sent to the Courts of Madrid. But these advances created an imbalance in progress achieved in the social, political (authority was still held in the island by the captain general), and economic realms (Piqueras 2003).

Spain's export interests obstructed economic reforms in Cuba. In 1882, Spain managed to increase protection for products sent to the island and ensured that the promised elimination of Spanish island trade tariffs would be gradual. The extraction of colonial revenue grew due to the increasing commercial imbalance between Spain and the Great Antilla as well as the debt—which in 1881 accounted for 6.3% of the GDP and had increased 91% since 1860 while the GDP had increased a mere 17%. However, the island compensated for this loss with its credit balance from trade with the United States and its current account balance, which went from -3% to -0.9% of its GDP during the same time period thanks to the stoppage of the drain on resources in the purchasing of slaves, the inflow of British capital for the purchase of railways, and North American capital put into factories and mines (Santamaría 2011; see fig. 4.3).

The problem of the lack of economic reforms in Cuba was further aggravated by the crisis of 1883–84, which plunged the price of sugar below that of US tariffs (see fig. 4.2). The Creole elite assembled to demand these reforms, but the 1884 signing of a Spanish–North American *modus vivendi*, which reduced the abovementioned tariff by 15%, succeeded in placating them. The island's budget returned to prewar levels, albeit with less income, and it began to incur deficits (Roldán 1997). Additionally, US sugar refiners formed a trust in 1887, and, in 1891, they succeeded in getting the US government to modify its customs duties on sugar confectionery, raising their cost and favoring the importation of raw sugar, which compelled Cuban sugar plantation owners to manufacture it as such, thus increasing their dependence on the North American market to export their products (Santamaría and García Álvarez 2004).

Securing the US market was of fundamental importance in optimizing the large investments made to modernize Cuban sugar plantations, since making a profit from economies of scale from the technology that had been installed required increasing their production (Iglesias 1998).

It was likewise essential for the metropole that the island's economic growth enable the continued extraction of revenue for the importation of provisions (on which its population's diet depended), and to alleviate territorial imbalances caused by resource concentration in its sugar supply. These imbalances were exacerbated by the War of '68 and its effect on the eastern half of the island, as well as by failed projects to construct a railway that would have enabled communication with the west (Zanetti and García Álvarez 1987).

The effect of the change in US tariffs led the Cuban elite to assemble again as the "Movimiento Económico" to call for the endlessly deferred reforms, due to the fact that Spain was undermining the foundation of the island's exports. This time they were joined by the metropolitans who operated in the Great Antilla, joining interests that affected the colonial agreement. Nevertheless, a Spanish–North American treaty again succeeded in deferring any resolution.

The Foster–Cánovas Treaty of 1891 reduced the US tariff on Cuban sugar, but, in exchange, it divided the island market between North American and Spanish exportations, reducing customs tariffs for both (Zanetti 1998). As a result, the Cuban sugar output grew to 1,100,000 tons (see fig. 4.2), but at the cost of ceding even greater control of its economy to a foreign country.

The Spanish–North American treaty of 1891 enabled Spain to increase its positive trade balance with Cuba during the periods 1885–89 and 1890–95 from \$7.5 million to \$14 million per year and enabled the taxed revenue extracted from the island to rise from \$16 million to \$24 million, thanks to the 3.3% annual increase of the real GDP per capita (see fig. 4.3), a similar increase to that of Germany or the United States, both leaders of the Second Industrial Revolution. However, without the slavery on which the colonial system in the Great Antilla had been based, the constant worsening of problems caused by the insufficient and postponed reforms, and the social polarization stemming from the increased number of migrants coming from the mother country and the Spanish business owners operating on the island, the decisive capacity that the United States achieved over the island's economy could lead to devastating outcomes.

In effect, in 1895, the United States declined to renew its treaty with Spain, and that same year marked the beginning of Cuba's second war of independence. This time, the conflict was to extend throughout the island's territory, and the Creole elite did not demonstrate the same level of attachment to the metropole as they did in 1868–78 (Zanetti 1998).

Cuba's postponed colonial reforms began after the outbreak of war in 1895. The territory was granted political autonomy, but it was not sufficient enough to tilt the balance of the conflict in favor of the Spanish. The devastating conflagration lasted from 1895 to 1898, until the US intervened, putting an end to Spanish dominion on the island.

#### Conclusion: Epilogue on Spain in Cuba

The colonial relationship between Spain and Cuba, reformed at the end of the 18th century, satisfied interests on both sides. It favored economic growth for the former and a share in its earnings for the latter, because it was in line with the conditions of both parties: for the island, it facilitated the supply of resources they lacked internally and the necessary means for its growth—slaves and free trade; for the motherland, it established the instruments enabling its fiscal exploitation, given Spain's lack of internal demand and the industrial capacity that would have allowed it to have a level of control and exploitation over its territories like that of the British Empire.

The conditions that the reforms of the ruling relationship of Spain over Cuba were based on also guaranteed its success and perpetuation, but only until it led to substantial changes in those same conditions, since it established a strict adherence to the foundations of the colonial pact and an inability to adapt or modify them.

For the aforementioned reasons, the tools of control used by the Spanish government in Cuba were strengthened, rather than relaxed, in response to changes in the island's economy and society, which hampered the prolongation of colonial relations after the abolition of slavery. This inability to adapt explains why the dissociative elements behind this relationship ultimately prevailed. The slave trade and forced work of Africans enabled great growth on the island, but it also led to a specialization in products that created serious territorial imbalances and an export concentration in the US market, which in turn led to the United States' holding decisive power over the Great Antillean economy, a prospect that was not contemplated when ties were reestablished with the metropole at the end of the 18th century.

The colonial relationship with Spain would end up seriously stunting the economic growth in Cuba that the relationship had been based on and that had made the territory valuable to the metropole. Furthermore, the endurance of this relationship also depended on the volition of a foreign

country, which was the island's market and, as long as it existed, enabled the changes needed in the relationship to be further postponed.

Along with the social problems that were passed down from slavery and inequalities, which after the disappearance of the institution of slavery were perpetuated in the labor market and in practices and customs, the hyper-specialization of production in Cuba, which ultimately was one of the motives leading to its independence and which endured even after it was achieved, as well as the asymmetrical relationship with the United States, constituted the legacy inherited from the colonial period that marked the history of the island to come.

## NOTE

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