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The Cuban melting pot in the late colonial period

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Abstract

Between 1774, the date of the first official enumeration, and the end of the following century, the population of Cuba grew ninefold to 1.6 million, mostly because of the slave trade, and immigration from Spain. While census data offer a relatively dependable mass of data, although spare in details, vital statistics are rare and of very poor quality. The paper attempts an analysis of the factors of growth of the three major “racial” groups—the White, the Mulatto, and the Black—and of their mixing. It confirmed the commonly accepted notion of the higher mortality, and lower fertility, of the Black population (mainly slaves): its losses due to the negative natural balance were more than offset in the first phase by the inflow of slaves. But the Black population declined in the second part of the nineteenth century with the demise of the trade. The theory of the fastest growth of the Mulatto group because of the frequent intrusion of the White males in the Black reproductive pool, could not be clearly verified, although it is fully supported by the developments of the following century.

Keywords: Cuba, Slave trade, Race, Mixing, Population

Colonial Cuba

The size of the population of Cuba, at the time of its first contact with the Europeans, is unknown, and will probably remain so forever. To the eyes of the first visitors, the indigenous populations, Tainos and Ciboneys, appeared less developed and more sparsely settled than the indigenous of the nearby Hispaniola. A careful comparative analysis of Hispaniola’s surviving documentation (literary and archeological) and of its social organization suggests a population within a range of a few hundred thousand individuals. Cuba, a larger island, was demographically much smaller (Livi Bacci, 2003).¹ Its indigenous population was bound to disappear in a few decades after the first contact with the Spanish conqueror, which destroyed its fragile social structure, imposed forced labor, determined migration, and dislocation, intruded in the indigenous’ reproductive pool, and introduced new foreign pathogens from overseas that led to the untold death of numerous not immune people. Whatever the initial number, and whatever the respective force of each of the various destructive factors at play, by the mid-sixteenth century

¹ “Most likely figure between 200,000 and 300,000”, p. 49. Hispaniola has a surface of 76,422 km²; Cuba, of 110,860 km².

the indigenous population had been wiped out. Immigration from Spain was slow, and little more than 1000 *vecinos* (households) were counted in 1608, mostly in Havana and Santiago, with a total population estimated at around 10,000 souls.² The increasing importance of Havana as a maritime and commercial hub, and the incipient sugar industry, attracted immigrants from Spain and raised the demand for African slaves, to be employed as servants in the households, artisans in the cities and manpower in the sugar cane plantations. In 1689, over 5000 *vecinos* were counted, and at the turn of the century, the total population of the island could have been around 50,000 (Fuente, 1993).³ The increasing importance of the plantation economy, mainly sugar cane, but also tobacco and coffee, the reforms under the reign of Carlos III, and the liberalization of trade, initiated after the brief occupation of Cuba by the British in 1762, at the end of the Seven-year War, accompanied the acceleration of population growth. The first *Censo*, a semi-official population count (1774), totaled 172 thousand inhabitants, mostly in the northern part of the island, and for one half settled in Havana and its surroundings. In 1907, the accurate census taken under the direction of the U.S. War Department counted over two million inhabitants, a 12-fold increase over the population counted 131 years before. Not an unusual increase in the American continent, where sustained immigration (White and Black) compounded with a relatively robust natural increase produced vigorous growth.⁴ The mainly White population was progressively replaced by the non-White component that became a majority towards the mid-nineteenth century owing to the slave trade⁵; then the balance was inverted as immigration from Spain increased and the slave trade waned and finally ceased.

A comprehensive history of the Cuban population in colonial times has still to be written, although relatively rich documentation exists and several important studies have been made.⁶ The following pages explore this documentation—mainly censuses, including those taken in 1899 and 1907—in search of new clues for interpreting the demography of the late colonial period, with particular reference to race and status (free or slave), and to the factors that might have influenced the mixing of the various groups.

The analysis of populations in rapid transition—as the one of Cuba as well as of other American countries—is a complicated endeavor, given the concurring flows of White immigrants from Europe and Black slaves from Africa, their initial “mixing” and successive “mixing of mixing”. To give an idea of the impact of the trade, in the first two decades of the nineteenth century, an average of 10,000 slaves were brought to the island every year (about 3% of the population). With the progressive waning of the slave trade, after the mid-century, immigration from Spain and the Canary Island (and from China) gave a significant contribution to the island’s growth.

² See Table 2: there were 1094 *vecinos* in 8 cities, excluding the few *vecinos* settled in the interior, the slaves and the transient population persons in the port of Havana.

³ Ibidem, Table 2

⁴ Between 1800 and 1900, the population of Cuba grew sixfold, those of Brazil and Argentina fivefold, and that of the United States, 14-fold. Among the large countries, only Mexico, that received few immigrants and admitted few slaves, had a more moderate increase (less than threefold).

⁵ In 1820, Spain formally abolished the slave trade, after an agreement with Britain in 1817, but the trade continued unabated until the late 1860s given the growing demand of manpower for the cane plantation and the sugar industry, and in spite of a few attempts to restrict it. Slavery was definitely abolished in 1886.

⁶ A classic analysis of the population of Cuba can be found in the *Ensayo Político de la Isla de Cuba* of Alexander von Humboldt, a modern and comprehensive approach to Cuban society, economy and demography. A unique holistic approach, that no other later scholar has had the opportunity, and the courage, to replicate. See von Humboldt, (1998).

Table 1 Population, by color and racial status, 1774–1907

Year	Whites	All Colorados	Total population	Free Colorados	Slave Colorados
1774	96,440	75,180	172,620	30,847	44,333
1792	133,559	138,742	272,301	54,152	84,590
1817	239,830	313,203	553,033	114,058	199,145
1827	311,051	393,436	704,487	106,494	286,942
1841	418,291	589,289	1,007,624	152,838	436,495
1861	764,750	594,488	1,359,238	225,938	368,550
1877	1,032,435	489,249	1,521,684	272,478	199,094
1887	1,102,889	529,298	1,632,187	–	–
1899	1,052,397	520,400	1,572,797	–	–
1907	1,440,013	608,967	2,048,980	–	–
Rate of change between Censos					
1774–1792	18.1	34.0	25.3	31.3	35.9
1792–1817	23.4	32.6	28.3	29.8	34.2
1817–1827	26.0	22.8	24.2	– 6.9	36.5
1827–1841	21.2	28.9	25.6	25.8	30.0
1841–1861	30.2	0.4	15.0	19.5	– 8.5
1861–1877	18.8	– 12.2	7.1	11.7	– 38.5
1877–1887	6.6	7.9	7.0		
1887–1899	– 3.9	– 1.4	– 3.1		
1899–1907	39.2	19.6	33.1		

Source: 1774, 1792, 1817, 1827: Ramon de la Sagra, *Historia Economica-Politica y Estadistica da la Isla de Cuba*, Arazosa y Soler, Habana, 1831, pp. 3–7. 1841: *Resumen del Censo de la Población de la Isla de Cuba a fin del año 1841*, Imprenta del Gobierno, 1842; 1861, 1877, 1887, INE; 1899: *Census of Cuba 1899*, War Department USA, 1899; 1907: *Cuba, Population, History and Resources, 1907*, United States Bureau of the Census, Washington, 1909

Counting people

Counting people in a vast, partly unexplored country, with difficult land communications, was not an easy undertaking. Indeed, most of the quantitative information comes from the censuses that, until the end of the period under study, provide only basic statistics; sporadic vital statistics are defective and incomplete and must be used with great care. For these reasons, many aspects of the island's demography remain obscure.

Table 1 reports the population from 1774 to 1907 according to the various enumerations, that until mid-nineteenth century were based mostly on the *padrones*, rolls, or lists of residents for taxation and administrative purposes, of the various municipal districts. The opinion of the U.S. Census Bureau experts was that the enumerations of 1774, 1792, 1817, and 1827 seemed “worth of credit”, although “they were vitiated by serious errors” (War Department, 1900). The returns available were derived from official documentation, now lost or buried in the archives, that was based on the actual direct knowledge of the country. In particular, the *Censo* of 1827,⁷ whose original returns have not been found, provides a relatively rich portrait of the demography and the economy of the island. The *Censo* of 1841 was an official undertaking of the administration and provides rich documentation that appears statistically sound. Five years later, another *Censo* has been judged faulty and incomplete (there was an unjustified fall of one-third of the slave population enumerated in 1841; a fall contradicted by other indicators) and has not

⁷ Except for the Census of 1899 and that of 1907, carried out and printed by the American administration, the word *Censo* will be employed in the following pages.

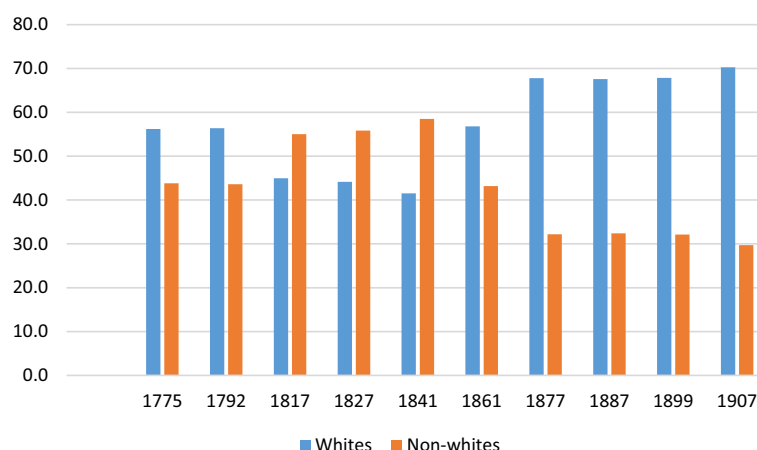


Fig. 1 Population of Cuba, by color, 1774–1907. Source: Oficina del Censo de los Estados Unidos. Censo de la Republica de Cuba 1907

been taken into consideration (Kiple, 1976). In 1856 the Spanish government created a bureau of statistics, in the Ministry of Agriculture, that was responsible for the *Censos* of Spain and its colonies, of 1861, 1877, and 1887, which included also the enumerations of the Cuban population. Finally, the *Censos* of 1899, after the end of the Spanish–American conflict, and of 1907, were taken under the experienced direction of the U.S. Census Bureau, and are high-quality enumerations.

From 1750 to 1841, the population grew at the rapid rate of about 2.5% annually, with the significant influence of the slave trade which brought to the island over half a million individuals (Pérez de la Riva, 1976)⁸; this rate abated to 1.5% between 1841 and 1861, as the arrival of slaves declined and came to a stop. Between 1861 and 1899, immigration from Spain and China did not compensate for the cessation of the slave inflows and the losses due to the 10-year war (1868–1877), the independence war (1895–1898), and the final Spanish–American war. As a consequence, the rate of growth turned negative in the final part of the century. The end of the conflicts and peace was followed by a strong rebound in the first decade of the twentieth century. However, the analysis of the aggregate population hides the complexity of the Cuban demographic dynamic deriving from the coexistence of Whites and Blacks, of slaves and free individuals, and the continuous mixing of the groups. Figure 1 gives a simplified summary of the changing incidence of the White and of the people of color over the period considered: the proportion of the Whites declined from 56% in 1774 to a minimum of 41% in 1841, rebounding to 70% in 1907.⁹ Mixing, immigration, the slave trade, and demographic behaviors of the different groups are at the basis of this profound secular cycle. Powerful political factors were at play, led by the fear that White supremacy would be endangered by the growth of the non-White population. The case of nearby Haiti, the bloody revolution against the French colonists (1791–1804), and the rise to power of the Blacks was an ominous warning of the danger of the progressive “blackening” of the island. However, unlike the

⁸ At the beginning of the nineteenth century there was also a considerable number of French nationals fleeing Haiti during the Revolution that led to the independence of the island in 1804.

⁹ According to the 2012 *Censo* of Cuba, where the “color de la piel” was investigated, the population “negra” and “mestiza” was 35.9% of the total.

British, French, and Dutch colonies of the Caribe, where the Whites were, relative to the Black population, in the proportion of one to ten, this was not the case in Cuba and Puerto Rico (Watts, 1987).¹⁰ In the earliest colonies, the plantation owners were typically absentee landlords, who resided in their home countries. The colonial administrators, sent by the ruling nation were few. Urban life was rudimentary, and there was no established White bourgeoisie. The reverse was true in Cuba where there was a loyal and well-rooted White community, plantation owners resided on the island, the administration was relatively well-developed, and Havana was a metropolis with close links with Spain and the world. Cuban landlords "...would customarily live most of the year in townhouses, in Havana (or perhaps Santiago, or Trinidad), visit their plantations or ranches at harvests or times of religious festival, and, as a rule, never visit Spain or other parts of the empire" (Thomas, 1993).

Within and across dividing lines

Cuban society was divided along multiple divisions, including racial, legal, and social. Besides Blacks (*negros, morenos*) and Whites (*blancos*), were the Mulattos (*pardos*); Blacks and Mulattos were either free or slaves; the Whites were *peninsulares*, if born in Spain, or *criollos*, if born in the island. Often Blacks and Mulattos were lumped together as *colorados* (colored, non-White). The Black slaves born in Africa were *bozales*, but those illegally brought to the island were declared free and called *emancipados*. The *Censos*, before the abolition of slavery, classified the population as *blancos*; *morenos*, either slaves or free; *pardos*, either slaves or free. The population was also classified by gender and marital status. In some cases, there was a summary classification by age (most commonly below 15, 15–60, and over 60).

The dynamic of the different racial groups was determined by the balance of births and deaths, and of migrant inflow and outflows. But for the Whites' pool, there was also a fractional contribution of the social process of whitening (*blanqueamiento*) of people of color with power, wealth, and influence. The Mulatto dynamic was more complex; since Mulatto births were the result of the normal process of reproduction internal to the group, plus those issued by the union of Mulatto women with White men. It is unknown whether this factor affected the fertility of White women, since the relation of their husbands with women of color (the reverse was exceptional) could have determined a physical separation of the couple, thus impacting women's fertility. Mulattos would also be accrued by births to unions between Mulatto women and Black men (a rare event was the reverse). The Mulatto population would also lose a small fraction of its members through the process of *blanqueamiento*. The Black population's dynamic depended on the natural balance of births and deaths internal to the group and, for its slave component, by the immigration of new slaves *bozales*; slaves could not emigrate (unless following their masters, or fugitives). Finally, it is worth mentioning—although not directly related to the dynamic of the *colorados*—the changing of status, from slave to free, through the process of *manumission* (a liberal concession of the master, sometimes linked to some obligation for the freed person), or *coartación* (the slave paid for

¹⁰ Table 6.1; Humboldt, *Ensayo*, cit., p.175.

his freedom) that were relatively common in Cuba, favored by legislation more lenient than in other Caribbean islands.

Any quantitative analysis faces a double challenge. The first consists of the paucity of data and their modest quality. In most cases, only summary statistics are available while the underlying documentation upon which the summaries were constructed is either lost or buried in the archives. Any refined analysis is, therefore, impossible. The second challenge, more fascinating, resides in the complexity of the factors generating the dynamic of each of the three major groups, interacting among themselves.¹¹

Mortality and survival: some general features

Before the health and medical revolution of the nineteenth century, survival was precarious almost everywhere in the world, and the expectation of life at birth was only exceptionally higher than 35 years. However, even in this high-mortality context, differences between groups and nations were relevant and determined distinctive levels of growth. Three factors were important in determining each demographic group's survival: (a) the standard of living, including the nutritional patterns, and the organization of society; (b) the environment in which daily life took place with particular reference to the living quarters and working surroundings; (c) the incidence and frequency of epidemics. The three factors are closely interrelated and their impact is difficult to measure. In Iberian America, race, geographical location, and epidemics determined important differences in the survival of the White and the non-White components; between those living in the highlands and those living in the low-lying coastal areas; between populations exposed to communicable diseases and those more isolated.

At the beginning of the past century, according to recent estimates, life expectancy was still very low, about 33 years, less than two years below that of the motherland (Albizu-Campos Espiñeira, 2018).¹² This was a consequence of the rather backward health and sanitary conditions of the Cuban population, which, however, had certainly improved over the situation prevailing in the late colonial times. The fact that the vital statistics were either non-existent or, the few that were collected, gravely defective, constrains our ability to make any detailed analysis of mortality levels and trends. But fragmentary data and other evidence indicate an important gap between Whites and non-Whites.¹³ The high-mortality context was affected by some important conditions. In the first place, Cuba was the center of a busy commercial and human hub, closely related to the other Caribbean populations and the rest of the world. In 1826–1830, 1780 ships landed in Cuban ports, which more than doubled, in thirty years (1856–59) to 4297 (Sagra, 1860). Spain maintained in Cuba an important military force “At any given time, between 10,000 and 20,000 troops were stationed in the fortresses around the city [Havana]” (Knight, 2008). Soldiers that were drawn from the peninsula, and their renewal implied, every year, the arrival and departure of several thousand men. The slave

¹¹ In other Latin American countries, with important indigenous component (Indios), the situation is obviously more complex. In Cuba, after mid-19th there was an important Chinese minority made of male laborers, but the inflow ceased in the 1880s. Between 1846 and 1860, 56,000 Chinese entered Cuba (Sagra, *Cuba en 1860*, cit., p. 42). According to Knight, between 1853 and 1874, 124,835 were the Chinese entering Cuba: Knight (1971).

¹² Estimates of life expectancy at birth for 1900 are 31.2 for males and 35.4 for females.

¹³ According to Gonzales Quiñones this gap was evident at the end of the eighteenth century, in 1792, when the estimated death rate was 26.5 per thousand for the White population and 34.9 for the non-White (Garcia Quiñones, 1996).

trade with Africa, migration from the mother country and the Canary Islands, and, after the mid-century, from China, implied the arrival and departure of ten thousand or more persons every year. This openness had an important effect on the circulation of microbial infections on the island as well as on the entire Caribe region. A second factor is the geographical setting of the island. Most of the Cuban population lived in low-lying areas along the coastline, where marshes were frequent; in mid-century one Cuban in four lived in congested Havana and its *arrabales* (suburbs). These were factors associated with a high incidence of infectious diseases, endemic or imported from abroad, and therefore with high mortality. In addition, the last third of the century was marked by the disasters brought about by the ten-year war of 1868–1877, the independence war of 1895–1898, and the final intervention of the United States that ended four centuries of Spanish domination.

Finally, it is an indisputable fact that the slave population in the plantations suffered more than slaves otherwise employed. Humboldt stated: “the mortality of the negroes varies greatly in Cuba, according to the kind of labor, the humanity of the masters and the overseers, and the number of women employed in taking care of the sick. I have heard discussed with the greatest coolness, the question of whether it was better for the proprietor not to overwork his slaves, and consequently have to replace them with less frequency, or whether he should get all he could out of them in a few years, and thus have to purchase newly imported Africans more frequently” (von Humboldt, 1856). Slaves constituted 43% of the total population of Cuba in 1841, with a significant portion working on plantations where their mortality was alarmingly high. And the reasons were clear for the German scientist, and clear the remedies: “An increase in the number of female slaves, so useful in the care of their husbands and their sick companions; their relief from labor during their pregnancies; greater attention to their children; the establishment of the slaves by families in separate cabins; an abundance of food; an increase of the number of days of rest; and the introduction of a system of moderate labor for their own account, are the most powerful and the only means to prevent the diminution in numbers of the Blacks.”¹⁴

The impact of epidemics

The incidence and frequency of epidemics can be read in Fig. 2, which reports the series of deaths in the city of Havana from 1800 to 1913; (Le-Roy y Cassá, 1913) the population of the city (within and outside the walls) grew fourfold in the nineteenth century, from 63,000 (1801) to 250,000 (1900) inhabitants. Within this ascending trend, it is evident the peak of deaths due to the 1895–98 war, as well as the relatively high plateau of deaths during the 10-year war. We shall see, later on, the disproportionate number of excess deaths among the *colorados* produced by the 1895–1898 war; the same was likely true for the preceding long conflict. It is also to be noted the peak in 1833, due to the first cholera outbreak, that wiped out 7 percent of the population. Estimates for the entire island put the total number of deaths around 30,000, almost 4 percent of the

¹⁴ Ibidem, p. 229. It must be added that slave *bozales* suffered a very high mortality during the period of “acclimation” or “seasoning”—the first months or years—after their arrival. Put in modern scientific parlance, they suffered also of PTSD, post-traumatic stress disorder.

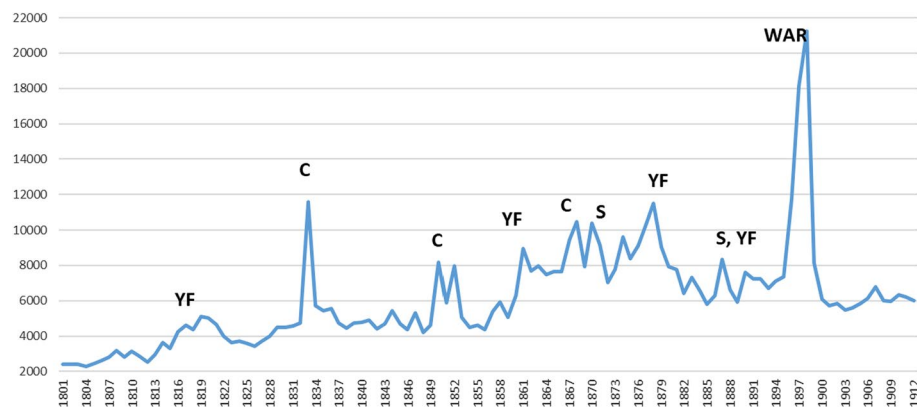


Fig. 2 Deaths, and epidemics, Havana, 1801–1912. *Source:* Jorge Le-Roy Cassá, (1913). C = cholera; YF = yellow fever; S = smallpox; W = war

Table 2 Death rates (per thousand) by age and sex, color and racial status, 1862

Age	Deaths rates (per 1000)					
	White males	White females	Free males of color	Free women of color	Slaves males	Slaves females
0–10	45.5	44.4	57.6	46.4	42.9	43.6
10–20	6.2	4.8	7.1	7.1	10.6	7.3
20–40	18.0	15.7	30.0	22.8	16.9	14.1
40–60	22.2	18.7	26.9	25.3	28.0	22.3
Over 60	66.0	77.7	62.2	67.5	84.7	82.7
Average	31.6	32.3	36.7	33.8	36.6	34.0
Ratios between races						
	Free of color to White, males		Free of color to White, females		Slaves to White, males	Slaves to White, females
0–10	1.266		1.044		0.744	0.940
10–20	1.157		1.487		1.487	1.037
20–40	1.664		1.455		0.564	0.621
40–60	1.210		1.347		1.044	0.884
Over 60	0.941		0.868		1.363	1.225
Average	1.248		1.240		1.040	0.941

Source: Fondo Documental INE, Resumen de los bautismos, matrimonios y defunciones que tuvieron lugar en la isla de Cuba en 1862

total population, three or four times the incidence that the same outbreak generated in Spain, France, or Italy. Cholera was introduced in Québec by a ship proceeding from Ireland in June 1832, and spread all over the western coast and the Gulf of Mexico; from there it was carried to Havana from New Orleans in February 1833. From Havana cholera spread to the whole island, particularly among the Black slaves of the sugarcane and

coffee plantations.¹⁵ The highest cholera mortality among the Blacks, and particularly among the slaves, is justified by the overcrowding in their living quarters (*barracones*) and, in general, by their extreme poverty. Cholera hit Havana and the entire island in 1850 and in the following 3 years, totaling 6180 deaths in Havana and 17,144 in the entire islands (Piña y Peñuela, 1855). The third epidemic, in 1867–1871 (with remission in 1869), appears to be the last, and its effects were comparable with those of the previous outbreak (a total of 7067 deaths in Havana, against 6180). Initially, cholera hit Black *stevedores* attending a ship proceeding from New Orleans. The three major outbreaks occurred concurrently with the waves that impacted the whole Western world. Sparse evidence suggests that the Black population suffered more than the White one.

Yellow fever was endemic in Africa and passed to America with the slave trade; it was endemic in Cuba and the Caribe until the end of the nineteenth century, when a Cuban scientist, Carlos Finley, established that the vector of the virus was the mosquito *Aedes aegypti* and efficient sanitary policies were developed to contain its effects. Humans are the reservoir of the virus, but the transmission among humans occurs through the bites of the mosquito. Yellow fever was constantly present on the island, although it did not produce the mortality peaks of cholera.¹⁶ However, the White population appeared to be much more vulnerable than the Black and was exceptionally lethal for travelers who had recently arrived in Cuba, as well as among the troops who arrived from Spain.¹⁷ Whether the Blacks had acquired some degree of immunity that lowered their vulnerability to the disease is a matter of scientific debate but there is evidence that their specific mortality was much lower than among the Whites (Espinosa, 2014). Finally, smallpox was another endemic disease, but the progress of vaccination reduced its incidence during the nineteenth century. A plausible hypothesis is that vaccination proceeded along a social gradient, leaving behind the most disadvantaged, and contributing to the higher mortality of the slave population.

Some additional, although very limited, information on the mortality level of the island, can be obtained for 1861–1862. In 1861, the *Censo* provided the age distribution of the population by gender, and racial status which included people of color (primarily Mulattos) and slaves (mostly Blacks); in 1862, a statistic of deaths with comparable detail was also published.¹⁸ Coherent age groups have been estimated, and age-specific mortality rates calculated (Table 2). The results must be taken with several grains of salt, because of the weakness of the data, which is also referred to as one sole year. In general mortality rates appear considerably higher for the slaves, and the free *colorados*, than for the Whites. Any generalization to the whole period under consideration would be, however, improper (Table 3).

Data on population and deaths are also available for the city of Havana, probably of better quality than those for the whole country. In 1862, the death rate for the White population was 32.3 per thousand, that of the slaves 34.8, and for the free *colorados* 41.7 (De la Pezuela, 1863).

¹⁵ Le-Roy Cassá, *Estudios*, cit., p. 14.

¹⁶ According to Guerra, between 1856 and 1879, there were 20,735 deaths by yellow fever in Havana, 4875 in the Departamento Oriental and 3737 in the Departamento Occidental. See Guerra, (1999)

¹⁷ Troops in Cuba increased tremendously during the 10-year War (1868–77) and the Independence War (1895–1898).

¹⁸ INE, Fondo Documental, *Resumen de los bautismos, matrimonios y defunciones que tuvieron lugar en la isla de Cuba en 1862*, Instituto Nacional de Estadística. (Spanish Statistical Institute) (ine.es), accessed 10/12/2021.

Table 3 Gender ratio (M/F), by color, population of Cuba, 1774–1907

	M/F White	M/F Free of Color	M/F Slaves of Color	M/F Total of Color	M/F Population, Total
1774	1.36	1.10	1.85	1.48	1.41
1792	1.18	0.87	1.28	1.10	1.14
1817	1.19	1.07	1.66	1.41	1.31
1827	1.18	0.95	1.77	1.49	1.34
1841	1.19	0.98	1.81	1.54	1.38
1861	1.34	0.97	1.49	1.26	1.30
1877	1.40	–	–	1.03	1.27
1887	1.22	–	–	1.08	1.18
1899	1.15	–	–	0.94	1.08
1907	–	–	–		1.10

Source: see Table 1

Human losses of the 1895–1898 war

The second Independence war was a bloody and lengthy confrontation between the Cuban insurgents and the Spanish forces, that started in June 1895 and ended with the U.S. intervention in April 1898, which defeated Spain's army, leading to its surrender in the following August. At the peak of the conflict, in 1897, Spain fielded 137,000 men (Maluquer de Motes, 1992) against an unspecified number of insurgents, probably of the same order of magnitude. The Independence war started in the eastern provinces, but then proceeded westward, and the entire country was involved. To measure the impact of this massive fighting force on the island, one must remember that Cuba, in those times, had little more than 1.5 million inhabitants. The non-White population represented less than one-third of the population but was a majority in the insurgent forces, and their leaders (Maximo Gómez and Antonio Maceo) were themselves *colorados* (Helg, 1998). The regular Spanish forces suffered 43,000 victims according to official sources, the great majority (93%) because of disease, and a small minority on the battlefield.¹⁹ The losses of the insurgents are unknown. However, it is among the non-fighting, civilian population that the losses were appalling, because of the devastations, hunger, disease, and actual violence. An indirect proof can be inferred by comparing the *Censos* of 1887 and 1899, a risky affair, because of the unknown level and direction of the distortions in the population's enumeration, from which both counts suffered. In any case, between the two dates, the population declined (– 4%), notwithstanding a possible growth between 1887 and 1895, sustained by a robust inflow of immigrants.²⁰ When General Weyler took command of the Spanish army, he adopted an extremely harsh

¹⁹ Maluquer, *Nación*, cit. p. 56.

²⁰ Had the 1887 census population (1632 thousand) continued to grow at the same annual rate of 1861–87 (about 0.7%), and given the intense immigration in the late 80 s and early 90 s, the pre-war population (beginning of 1895) could be estimated at 1730 thousand persons, declining to 1573 thousand at the end of 1898 (– 9.1). This estimate is of the same order of magnitude of the losses due to the concentration camps, estimated at 155,000/170,000 by Andreas Stucki, (Stucki, 2017), cited by Moisand J, *Revue d'Histoire du XIXe Siècle*, pp. 234–236. Numbers of the losses induced directly and indirectly by the war of 400/500 thousand have been advanced—but on weak empirical basis.

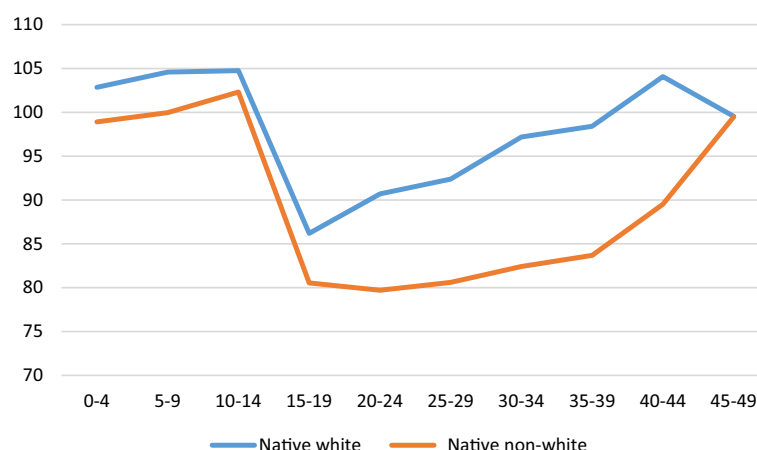


Fig. 3 Males per hundred females, native White and native non-White, 1899. Source: War Department (1900). *Census of Cuba, 1899*, p. 206

and cruel policy, called *reconcentración*, which consisted of the deportation of the rural population, suspected of favoring the insurgents, in concentration camps in the cities and suburban areas, in appalling living conditions, because of crowding, lack of elementary hygiene, lack of food, rampant infections, diseases, and violence. Mortality of the civil population soared, but no credible estimate is available. As in other periods of crisis and stress, the people of color suffered more than the rest of the population. This can be inferred indirectly by looking at the sex ratio, by age, of the White and the non-White, according to the 1899 census. The hypothesis is that human losses, particularly in the young-adult ages (between age 15 and age 40) were higher for males than for females and that the difference might be imputed to the losses suffered by men on the battlefield and in the fighting areas of the war operations. Figure 3 reports the sex ratios, for both the White and the population of color. Between ages 15 and age 40, the *Censo* counted 205,000 White women and 188,000 White males (91.7 men per 100 women), 114,000 women of color and 92,000 colored men (with a ratio of 80.7). In interpreting the data, one must remember that both the White and the non-White suffered the general negative consequences of war, but that young-adult males suffered more, owing to their closer exposure to war; and among the young-adult men, the non-Whites suffered more than the Whites.

At the end of the colonial period, the expectation of life in Cuba was around 30 years, although public health had made some progress; the island was at a crossroads of epidemic waves; wars had left profound marks; poverty was deeply entrenched in the countryside. Survival among the slave population and the free *colorados* (with exceptions) was definitely more precarious than among the White—how much more precarious, it is impossible to tell with the available data. The population of African descent was more resilient to yellow fever but more vulnerable to smallpox and cholera; it had higher mortality according to the few probing possible

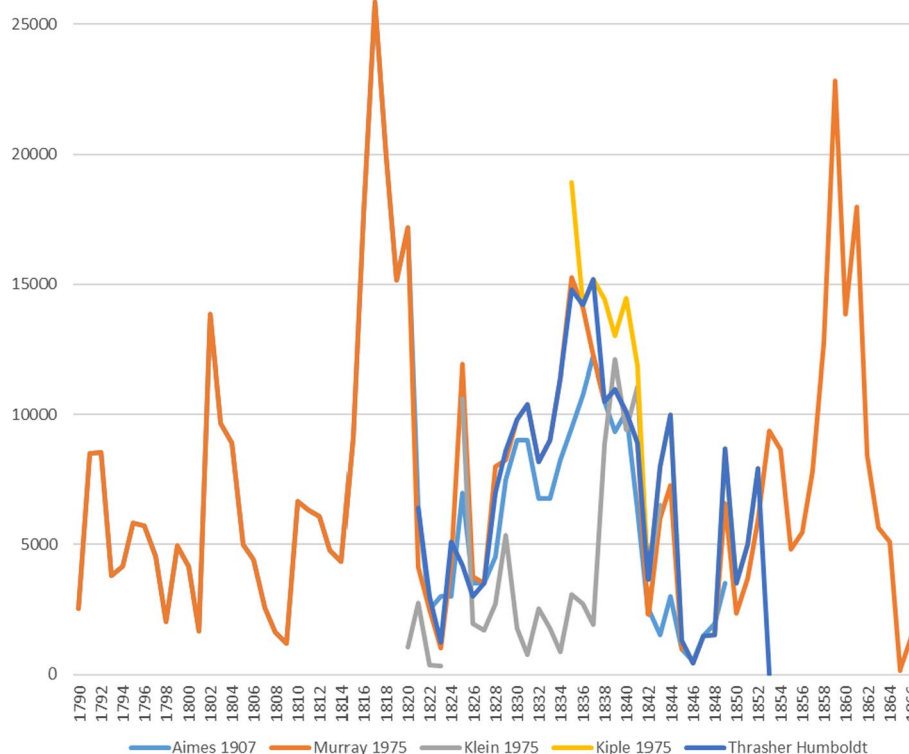


Fig. 4 Slaves taken to Cuba, according to various authorities

with the shaky statistics available. At this stage of our knowledge, it is impossible to go further.

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Between 1774 and 1899, the White population increased 11-fold and the non-White one sixfold, with annual rates of growth of 1.9 and 1.5 percent. Unfortunately, as already underlined, data on deaths and births are partial, defective, and incomplete, making it impossible for even an elementary analysis of the components of population change. However, the terrain is open for conjectural hypotheses, based on indirect indicators, analogies with better-known cases, or the use of models founded on partial data.

In the Cuban case, population growth owes a great deal to the forced immigration of slaves and to immigration, mainly from Spain and the Canary Islands. According to Humboldt, the trade brought to the island over 300,000 slaves between 1764 and 1820 (5000 per year on average); according to Curtin another 470,000 were taken to Cuba from 1821 to 1865 (almost 10,000 per year) when the trade came to a stop, for a total about 800,000²¹ (Figs. 4 and 5). As for immigration, from the late 1840s to the end of the century, it was of the order of 300,000, or about 5,500 per year.²² No data is available for

²¹ Humboldt, *Ensayo politico*, cit., p. 203. (Curtin, 1969).

²² Estimate of net migration from Spain is 120,000 between 1846 and 1862, according to Moreno Friginals and Moreno Masó (1993). The net balance between sea passenger's arrivals and departures, from and to Spain, in the period 1882–1899, was 97,473 (Maluquer. *Nación*, cit, p. 49). On average, in the two periods of 17 and 18 years, net migration was 6.2 thousand per year. Extending this latter number to the period 1863–1881, for which there is no information, a total of 335,000 is obtained for the entire period (1846–1899).

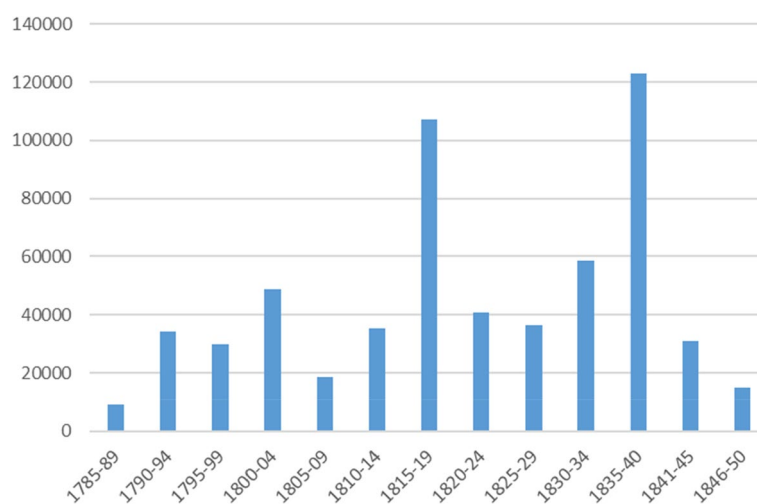


Fig. 5 Slaves taken to Cuba according to Pérez de la Riva. Source: Pérez de la Riva, (1976) (Table 1)

the earlier period (1774–1845), but a guess of 200,000 seems plausible. In sum, immigration (both forced and free) could have brought to the island a number of persons in the vicinity of the total growth of the island, 1.4 million, accumulated between 1774 and 1899. If we hypothesize that these estimates are relatively correct, and represent net immigration (net of the immigrants returning to their country of origin or proceeding to other countries, and of the re-exportation of slaves) it follows that most of the growth of the island had been due to immigration of some sort, and only a modest share to natural growth. But this does not inform us as to the “internal” dynamic of the population: there is evidence that slaves had a negative natural growth (deaths exceeded births) while, on the contrary, natural growth was positive for the White population. For the third component, the free non-White population (Mulattoes and Blacks), the complexity of its dynamic, renders uncertain any hypothesis. In Havana (1825–1829), births exceeded deaths by 27% in the White population but were 11% lower than deaths among the non-White (Sagra, 1833). Between 1849 and 1857, in the Dioceses of Havana and of Cuba, the balance of births and deaths was strongly positive for the Whites and the free non-White (births exceeding deaths by 71 and 34%, respectively) and in equilibrium for slaves.²³ Moreno Fragnals, between 1835 and 1860, found in 14 *ingenios* in the western part of the island, birth rates between 19 and 28 per thousand, and death rates of 61–63 per thousand.²⁴ Apparently, the expansion of the sugar economy obliterated the semi-patriarchal arrangements existing until the initial part of the nineteenth century, worsening the living conditions of the plantation slaves. The most shared opinion is that in Cuba, as in the rest of America, “a low natality and a high mortality made slavery one of the most devastating human experiences...” Others believe, on the contrary, that the slave population had a positive “internal” dynamic (Knight, 1970, 1977). It has also been argued that

²³ Sagra, Cuba en 1860, cit., p. 22.

²⁴ Cited by Gonzalez Quiñones (1992).

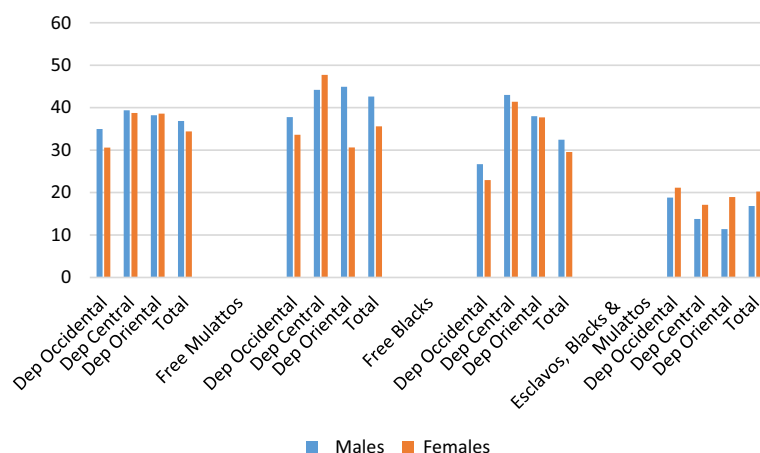


Fig. 6 % Children, males and females, by Departamento, color and racial status, *Censo* of 1827. Source: *Censo de 1827*

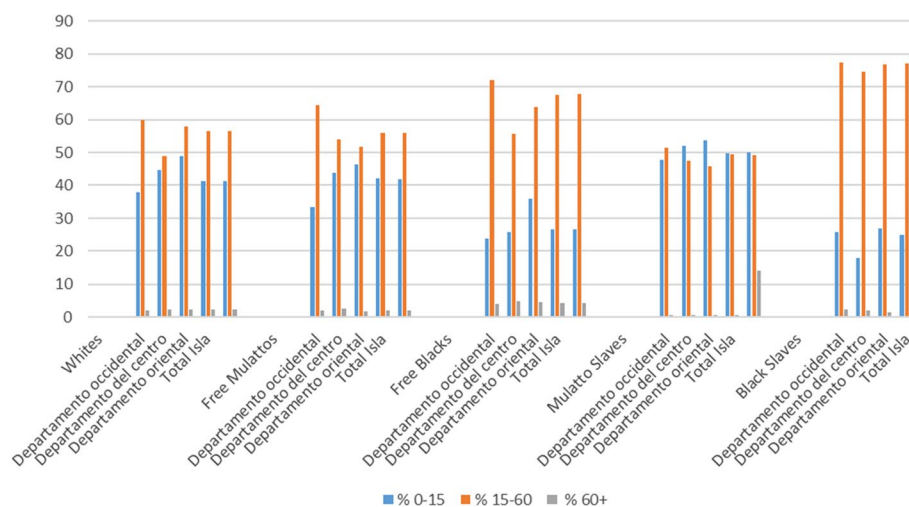


Fig. 7 Age structure, by color, racial status and Departamento, *Censo* de 1841. Source: *Censo de 1841*

the more favorable living conditions of urban slaves—engaged as domestic servants, or employed as artisans, with higher occupational skills, Spanish speaking, and at times literate—allowed for positive natural growth. On the other hand, those living in the *campo*, field workers in the plantations, were declining—in absence of new arrivals—because of higher mortality and lower fertility: among the slaves “two basic divisions were between fields slaves, largely African, and domestic slaves, largely Creole.”²⁵ If little can be drawn from the scarce and weak vital statistics, the *Censos* provide more robust, although limited information. Figures 6 and 7, based on the 1827 and 1841 counts, give the distribution of the population of the three departments of the island (occidental, central and oriental) by color and racial status and three age groups. In 1827, the proportion of the

²⁵ Knight, *Social structure*, cit., p. 262.

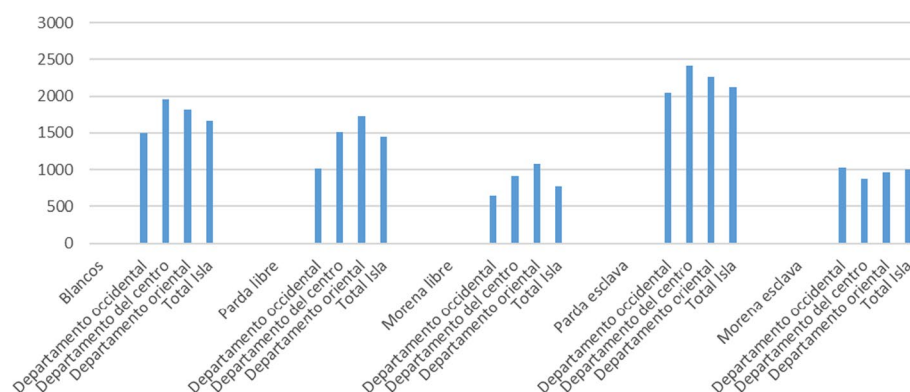


Fig. 8 Children per 1000 women 15 to 60 years, by Departamento, color and racial status, *Censo de 1841*. Source: *Censo de 1841*

youngest group (below 15 for males and below 12 for females) is highest among the free Mulattos and the free Blacks, lowest for slaves, and intermediate for Whites. In 1841, Mulatto slaves (they were grouped with Black slaves in 1827) had the highest proportion of children, while the lowest was among Black slaves and free Blacks, with the Whites and the Mulattoes in an intermediate position. Both in 1827 and 1841 slaves had the lowest proportion of youngsters. This is comprehensible because a high proportion of Black slaves were *bozales*, born in Africa and recently brought to Cuba, among which women and children were a minority. In general, the western department, dominated by Havana and its surroundings, carried the lowest proportion of youngsters. Figure 8 reports the ratio between youngsters and women 15 to 60 years old, a ratio loosely correlated to general fertility rates. The ratios are lowest among Black slaves and free Blacks, and highest among Whites. These ratios have a weak explanatory power since they are affected by mortality, fertility, and age structure (and therefore migration): however, it may be said that a high proportion of children is consistent with a higher rate of growth.

Blancos, pardos and morenos

Mixing and miscegenation (*mestizaje*) were unforeseen accidents of the Iberian Conquest of America. On principle, the project was simple: on one side the Christian conqueror, bearer of the true faith, added new subjects to the Crown and new souls to Christianity. This was the republic of the Spaniards, a projection oversea of the peninsular order. On the other side was the republic of the Indios, who accepted the new order as free vassals of the Crown. Both republics were to be kept in separation and governed by their own rules, provided that those of the Indians did not collide with those of the Spaniards, and refused polygamy, blasphemy, infanticide, or cannibalism.²⁶ The separation had to be physical as well: Spanish *vecinos* (residents) living in their own towns, the Indios in their villages, and in the *campo*. This geometrical and neat separation of

²⁶ Konetzke (1993), Mörner (1967), On mixing, see the pioneer work of Rosenblat (1954).

different groups worked in the Iberian Peninsula, where the mixing between Christians and Muslims was confined to exceptional cases. But it was destined for an almost immediate failure in the New World. The large majority of the Iberians were adventurous young men, mostly unmarried, with religious and moral scruples inversely proportional to the distance from home. They had the power, most of them had risked their lives, and sought adequate rewards including sexual retribution. Some, maybe many, needed genuine companionship. Whatever the reasons and the circumstances, miscegenation occurred, a stream of births followed, and a growing mestizo population was formed. The growth of a mestizo population had another powerful drive in African slavery. African slaves as well as freemen acculturated and Christianized in Europe (*ladinos*), set foot in America as servants and retainers of the first conquerors. But it was the slaves brought directly from Africa as laborers to the depopulated Caribbean islands, the Caribbean coast, and Brazil, that soon outnumbered the tiny stream proceeding from Europe. They were brought also as far as Peru, via Cartagena; then to Portobello and, across the isthmus, to Panama; shipped to Callao and sold on the Lima market.

In Cuba, the indigenous population had disappeared since the sixteenth century, and mixing could occur only between Whites and Blacks, conditioned by structural, demographic, and cultural factors. In a slaving society like Cuba, the mixing of White men with women of color or Black, was tolerated, often deplored and reproved, but carried no penalty of any sort. In contrast, the contrary, the rare case of White women mixing with Black or *Mulatto* men was harshly condemned. The frequency of mixing depended on many factors such as an unbalanced sex ratio (men exceeding women); the ratio between Whites and Blacks/colored; the living arrangements; the working environment; residence in urban or rural environments. A few examples: there were more males than females among the White immigrants; the numerous Havana's garrison was male; more than two-thirds of the slaves carried from Africa were males²⁷; there were substantive differences—between the urban slaves and the field worker slaves—in the living and working arrangements; natural factors favored survival in the interior while affecting negatively the more densely populated coastal regions.

For the White *peninsulares*, and perhaps also for the White *criollos*, it is plausible to hypothesize a weak positive natural increase, typical of pre-modern populations in Spain and in Europe. Net immigration must have been positive all over the period, from Spain and the Canary Islands, from Saint Domingue during the Haitian revolution, and later in the century, from China.²⁸ Slaves (the majority were Blacks or *morenos*, a minority Mulattos) had a negative natural increase, a consequence of higher mortality, an unbalanced sex ratio, and suffered severe impediments to stable unions. Their main factor of growth was the slave trade, and their number declined rapidly when the

²⁷ Almost all Chinese immigrants were men, and the “survival” of Chinese traits depended by their mixing with colored women.

²⁸ No quantitative information is available for the French refugees from Haiti. Over 120,000 were the Chinese laborers arrived between 1853 and 1874 (see Thomas, 1993). However, the introduction often cited to the 1899 Census Report, states that 132,453 Chinese under contract were brought to Cuba in the period 1853–1873, and that 3973 of them died either en route or shortly after arrival (p. 71).

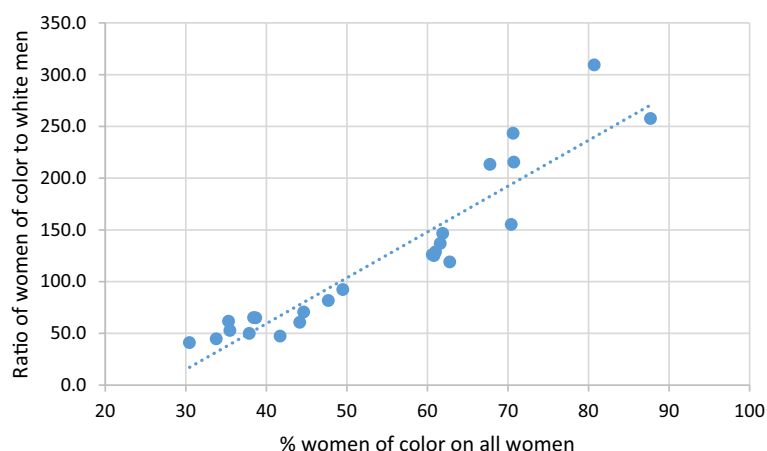


Fig. 9 % of women of color on all women, and ratio women of color per 100 White men. Source: Censo de 1841. % and ratios refer to the population of women and men aged 15–60 years old

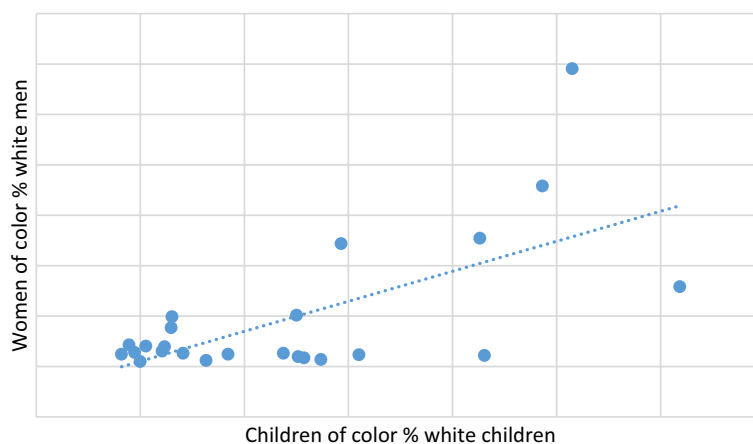


Fig. 10 Children of color per 100 children, and women of color per 100 White men. Source: Censo de 1841

trade came to a stop. Mulattos (*pardos*) were mainly free, but nothing can be said about their natural dynamic; they were a kind of “open” group, accrued by the children born to White–colored unions. They lost members—probably not many—to the process of *blanqueamiento* or crossing of the caste line into the White community. Finally, one cannot exclude that Black or women of color who had children with White men, would reduce their fertility in their racial group of origin. The paucity of data makes it impossible to test these hypotheses. It would be extremely interesting, for instance, to understand the factors of the abrupt decline of the non-White population from a peak close to 600,000, to a much lower level of around 500,000 in the late 70s and early ‘80s. Was this the consequence of the 10-year war, of the gradual demise of the slave trade, or of the enumeration’s distortions?

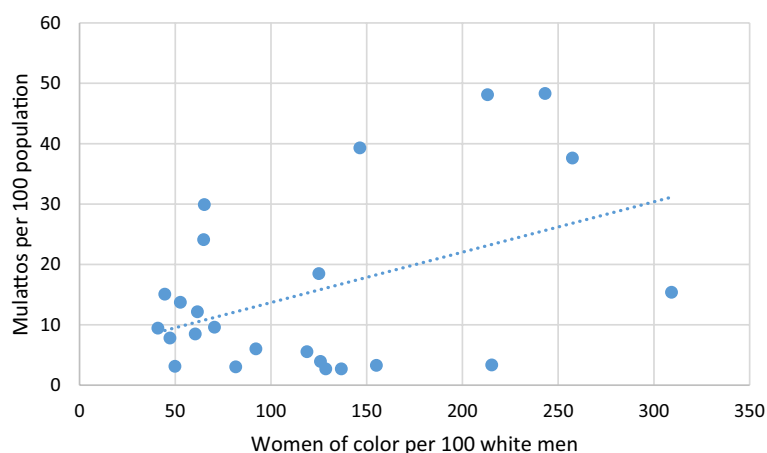


Fig. 11 Mulattos per 100 inhabitants and women of color per 100 White men. Source: *Censo de 1841*

The analysis of the *Censos* allows a few interesting although elementary considerations, besides those already made. In the *Censo* of 1841, the population of each of the districts was distributed into three age groups according to gender, race, and condition.²⁹ One factor determining the frequency of mixing was the number of women of color in relation to the number of White men. Figure 9 reports, for each one of the 24 districts,³⁰ the proportion of women of color, in relation to the ratio of women of color to White men (population 15–60 years old). There is a strong positive association, suggesting that an increased presence of women of color would correspond to increased exposure of White men to a mixed relation, and, as a consequence, to an increasing number of Mulatto births. This obvious hypothesis is confirmed by Fig. 10, where the proportion of children of color (below age 15) is related to the ratio between non-White women and White men (15–60), showing a direct—although not close—association between the two indicators. Finally, one could hypothesize a direct association between the latter ratio and the relative frequency of Mulattos in the population; Fig. 11 presents only a very weak association between the two. However, the data of the *Censos* cannot be pushed very far, given their limited quality and lack of suitable details.

An awkward conundrum

The demography of Cuba, in the late colonial period, represents an awkward conundrum for the demographer. The analysis carried over in this paper, while confirming a few well-known aspects, raises several questions, concerning the models of growth of the different “color” sectors of the population and the processes of mixing. This is also the consequence of the turbulent growth of the population due to immigration—either free or forced—much more relevant than natural growth. Limiting the comparison to the Greater Antilles, during the nineteenth century the rate of increase in Cuba (1.6%) was lower than in Puerto Rico (1.8%) but higher than in Hispaniola (Haiti and the Dominican

²⁹ White, free Mulattos, free Blacks, Black slaves, and Mulatto slaves.

³⁰ There were 25 *distritos*, but one, Colonia de Mos, has been omitted owing to its insignificant population of 92.

Republic in 1900) (1.2%) and in Jamaica (0.7%). In Cuba, over the entire period considered (1774–1907), the growth of the non-White component of Blacks and Mulattos (1.6%) was slower than the White's (2.0%), notwithstanding the fact that the trade carried more slaves to the island than the ships carried White immigrants.

The analysis has confirmed the notion that mortality was higher among the non-Whites than among the Whites, with an important gradient in the former group. And, in fact, there is sparse evidence that mortality was highest among the recently arrived *bozales*, and, in general, among the slaves in the plantations, and lower among those living in the city. Blacks were more exposed to epidemics, more resistant to yellow fever, but more vulnerable to cholera. Fertility levels and trends are more elusive; however, a few probes—including the age structure—point to a birth rate higher among the Whites, and lower among the slaves. Masters often opposed, directly or indirectly, marriages or stable unions of their slaves. In the plantations, slaves often lived in *barracones* and not in individual quarters. Concubinage with White men, or free men of color, was another factor depressing the slave's group dynamic, and another depressing factor was the two-to-one men–women sex ratio of the *bozales*. Another interesting question concerns the demographic responses to the abolition of slavery, and whether fertility increased and mortality declined. Only costly individual analysis may provide an answer.

The major unanswered issue, however, concerns the dynamic of the population of color, and of its two components, Blacks, and Mulattoes. In theory (net of the effects of migration), mixing would deplete the Black group, since Black women would give birth to Mulatto children with a father Mulatto, or White. For inverse reasons, the Mulatto group would gain through the mixing process. This issue has been explored in the preceding pages, but census data are of little help not helpful, also because after the 1877 *Censo* no distinction has been made between slaves (mainly Black) and free colored (mainly Mulattos), grouped together as *colorados*. Between 1827 and 1877, the White population more than trebled (+ 251%), the free colored (mainly Mulattos) more than doubled (+ 156%), while the slave (almost all Blacks) declined by one-third (– 31%) as a consequence of the demise of the trade. In the learned introduction to the 1899 census, an unfortunate sentence commented on the decline of the non-White component as follows: “Their diminution relative to the Whites, during the last half a century, is doubtless but another illustration of the inability of an inferior race to hold its own in competition with a superior one, a truth which is being demonstrated on a much larger scale in the United States.”³¹ However, in the very long run, the Census Bureau statement has been disproved, and this paper's assumption vindicated: between 1899 and 2012, according to the calculations of Cuban official statistics, while the White population has increased fourfold, the Black component has grown sevenfold and the mestizo 11-fold (ONEI, 2016). At least under the demographic profile, the “inferior race” held “its own in competition with the superior one.” And, in the very long run, demography is full of surprises.

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³¹ War Department, *Census of Cuba*, cit., p. 97.

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