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Von Humboldt, Alexander (2011), *Political Essay on the Island of Cuba: A Critical Edition*, Vera M. Kutzinsky and Ottmar Ette (eds.), The University of Chicago Press, Chicago-London, 2011, xxvi + 519 pp., \$65,00 Cloth, \$7,00 to \$52,00 E-Book.

The critical (re)editions of classical books or already published works are always received with expectations. It is supposed that the editors make a special effort to show new aspects or values that have been neglected or hidden in previous editions. Humboldt's book *Political Essay on the island of Cuba* is a good example of this.

The brilliant and meticulous critical edition edited by M. Vera Kutzinsky and Ottmar Ette, published by The University of Chicago Press in 2011, rescues the Prussian author and his controversial work for the Anglo reader market and came about, according to the editors, because many aspects of the *Essay* were previously banned and even wrongly translated into English.

The *Essay* has been controversial since it was first published in Paris in 1826. Translated into Spanish the following year, it was quickly censored and removed from the libraries in Havana. Its harsh criticism of slavery arrived in the island just when the sugar industry was booming and the numbers of slaves were increasing despite negotiations between the Spanish and British governments to end this traffic. Among other things, Humboldt refuted the idea that slavery was essential for agriculture in Cuba because, according to the figures, many slaves were not employed in the countryside but in the cities. He also pointed out that elsewhere manumissions were not as numerous as in Cuba, because there were laws to promote them. Frequently, those freed were urban slaves because they had varied mechanisms to earn money for their ransom. Humboldt also criticised the dependence on imports of foreign products and goods generated by the plantation system in Cuba.

The *Essay* was published in North America for the first time in 1829 when the debate between apologists and critics of the colonial system and slavery was in full swing. According to Kutzinski and Ette, the English translations offered partial and wrong versions and spread the image of Humboldt as a defender of the colonial system and slavery. Nothing is further from the truth. Humboldt understood slavery as a 'necessary evil and an inevitable political crime' (p. 118) born of the globalisation process that emerged with the conquest of America. However, considering that in the middle of the nineteenth century people were already talking about annexation in Cuba, we can understand the animosity towards the *Essay* and the author, particularly in North America.

The detailed study of the resources, the economy and the population of the island made of the *Essay* one of the most important and complete books on Cuba at that time. The Kutzinski and Ette critical edition offers much more than an excellent and rigorous translation of the French original version. It introduces Humboldt as a precursor of the analysis of globalisation, as the first European who observed American reality from a European perspective but far from the typical European superiority, and giving to the American countries their intrinsic values. It also presents Humboldt as a global and universal thinker, as an enlightened man who went further than the Enlightenment, as a collector of data who also received information from local people in America. In Cuba, for instance, Humboldt obtained information from the group of intellectuals led by Francisco Arango y Parreño. That is why he could introduce information in the *Essay* that would have been impossible for him to collect in the four months he was there.

There are only two omissions we find in this magnificent critical edition. First, the fact that, precisely because Humboldt collected part of his information from these Cubans, he disseminated a vision of slavery and slaves in Cuba that, in good part, was that of the planters and owners of sugar mills. So, in his work the situation of the slaves in Cuba appears to be much better than that of slaves in Jamaica, where a brutal and inhumane regime explained the high mortality figures among slaves. However, according to mortality and masculinity figures among slaves in Cuba, the Cuban slave system was similarly cruel. Second, Humboldt visited Cuba during three months in 1801, and again for about three weeks in 1804. By 1826, when the *Essay* was finally published, he already knew about the independence of most of Spanish America and about new possibilities of economic development; he also knew about laws against the slave trade; that is why he could have demonstrated that countries without slavery were possible in the Americas. After all, in 1826 Humboldt's *Essay* offered a vision of the past but with the knowledge of what happened later. Under these two last premises I think we should read and understand Humboldt's *Political Essay* too.

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