

Essay IV “Notes on Manners and Society in Havana Cuba”¹

The people of Cuba are by no means deficient in genius. The free intercourse they have enjoyed of late years with foreigners, has given them a glimpse of civilization by partially removing the gloomy Veil thrown over their minds by a barbarous government and superstitious Religion. The proud Spaniard from Europe still struts, in all the fancied superiority of birth and office, and monks parade the streets surrounded by all the solemn pageantry of their profession; but the first no longer enjoy their supremacy uncontested, and the holy character of the latter no longer shields them from the shafts of ridicule and satire. The Creole loses no opportunity of asserting his equality with the European, and the Priest is often reminded that other countries are powerful and happy under entire religious freedom. The clumsy furniture of old times, and the barbarous representations of Saints & Virgins, are fast giving place to the elegant conveniences, and decorations of their neighbors, & even the national *Olla podrida*² often cedes to the soups & culinary refinements of their late hosts. In fact there has been a rapid progress towards improvement for the last fifteen or twenty years. It may however be observed that they have all the vices of the decrepitude of society, without a due proportion of the vigorous virtues of its youth. Accustomed to dissimulation, by a monkish education, they seldom express their real sentiments, on any occasion. And never having been accustomed to see justice administered for Justice's sake but to attain it through the labyrinths of intrigue and favor, which they emphatically term by *Empeños*.³ If a man has a case pending in law, he surrounds the judges and assessors with the solicitations of his friends, from the congregate powers of whose interests he expects more than from the goodness of his cause. The consequence is, the most powerful gains, and justice sleeps.

From the above Causes the men in power, who have always been sent from Spain, altho' frequently of despicable talents & corrupt morals, are sure to be surrounded by a cloud of clients, who give them an influence in society to which they have no well founded claim. Hence the

meanness and dissimulation that very generally characterizes the inhabitants of Havana. The Creoles, altho idle and dissipated, have a genius and taste for poetry which circumstances considered they cultivate with success. Social intercourse in Havana offers few intellectual charms or resources. The men are badly educated and uninformed, and the science of the ladies seldom extends beyond knowing how to read. A predeliction for Vulgar dissipation seems to be the consequence. A passion for gambling pervades all ranks and classes of society. It is not uncommon to see fathers and mothers, with their sons & daughters, with Marquises, counts, generals, monks, and Vulgar peasants sporting at the same table. Whether it be from pride, indolence or prejudice, the Creoles seldom engage in commercial pursuits. Some have distinguished themselves in the Armies, others drone away their lives in the church, and many have risen to eminence in the law, but a far greater number do nothing usefull, and pass their insignificant lives in gambling, & dissipation. An ambition for more noble pursuits has however lately been excited by the return of several young gentlemen, who have been educated in the U. S. and gives reason to believe that under a liberal government & enlightened system of policy the natives of Cuba would very soon take the rank among men that nature has so well qualified them to hold. The country people or peasantry are equally addicted to gambling and dissipation. They are a hardy athletic race, sober and capable of enduring the extremest fatigue; they are excellent horsemen, allways go armed with a good sabre of country manufacture called a *machete*,] are obliging and civil, but defend themselves with courage and address if attacked or insulted. They are totally ignorant, and too indolent to cultivate the fertile lands they inhabit.

The people of Cuba have no taste for agriculture or rural pursuits, they never live in the country but from Necessity. They are however very fond of country parties on particular festivals, where they proceed in large parties from Estate to Estate during a month or six weeks when they are expensively entertained by their proprietors on provisions brot from towns for the purpose.

Gambling is allways a principal object of these excursions. The rapid progress made in agriculture of late years, particularly in the culture of coffee is intirely due to the policy of permitting the french and other foreigners to improve their lands. As that policy ceased with their revolution they have allready ceased to progress, and will probably remain where they are, if they do not retrograde unless there is another political change.

The Europeans monopolize, the power, commerce, mechanic Arts, and industry generally in Cuba. They consequently have kept the Creoles in a degrading dependence, which they seem now disposed to rise out of, and if assisted by circumstances they may perhaps effect their laudable intentions. The Europeans regarding Cuba as their patrimony have ever been opposed to the toleration of foreigners among them, even foreign commerce they regard with malignant jealousy: they claim a monopoly in all things. Several American and other foreign artists have of late years fixed here to the great benefit of the mechanic Arts; but they are constantly persecuted, petition after petition, has been presented to the government to expell them, and they are not now without apprehensions of being driven out. The Creoles of fortune very generally study the french language, which however they seldom speak well. The french are allmost the only foreign Authors they are acquainted with. The wars that Spain has been so constantly drawn into in Europe, and so contrary to her dignity and interests; the many instances of injustice, oppression, and humiliation they have suffered from both france & England, while they have broken down the national spirit, and destroyed all confidence in their own prowess, have generated a deeprooted hatred to both those nations. They trust none of their professions, and view all their operations with suspicion and jealousy. They view the people of the U. S. with less distrust and disapprobation than they do any other, notwithstanding the pains that ever have been taken to depreciate in their estimation our national character and political importance. They receive from our hands their improvements; their fashions in furniture, in equipage, and in dress; their youth are much more frequently sent to our

seminaries for education than to any other; and our markets are the sole,⁴ where for many years they have been accustomed to look for the sale of their produce, and a supply of the necessities and conveniences of life. Thus have the U. S. insensibly become to be regarded in Cuba allmost as their Metropolis. American politics excite much more interest in their minds than do those of Europe.

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² A dish of boiled meats.

³ By obligation or, possibly, by means of a protector or patron.

⁴ Shaler appears to have omitted a word here.