

Ridiculing Spanish Power Through Its Food: The United States of America and Their Aims in Cuba

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ABSTRACT: This paper offers a new approach to the conflict between the United States and Spain over the possession of Cuba during the nineteenth century by evaluating its history through food. More specifically, this paper will adopt an approach known as ‘culinary nationalism’ in order to understand why the US citizens who lived in Cuba despised Spanish cuisine. What emerges from an investigation of a variety of documents written by Americans who spent a period of their lives in Cuba is a widespread disgust for Spanish cuisine in Cuba, especially ‘the universal garlic’ that filled the island with its effluvia. American’s aversion to the smell of Spanish cuisine in Cuba did not depend on a simple aversion to garlic but was part of a wider process through which the US tried to expand its power and claim Cuba from the Spanish. Consequently, American discourse on Spanish food will be related to the broader debate on the formation and development of the US Empire in its own backyard and, at the same time, on the denigration of the Spanish empire.

The objective of this paper is to examine Americans attitudes towards Spanish food in Cuba during the second half of the nineteenth century in order to discover if the disgust for Spanish cuisine was just a matter of taste or if it concerned more relevant issues such as, for instance, power during the Age of Empires. It analyses how food was one of the various ‘cultural’ devices colonists employed that contributed to the consolidation of American influence and the destruction of the Spanish empire. It also analyses the phenomena of inclusion, exclusion and distinction through the lens of food. Indeed, diet and food are valid tools of analysis in understanding imperial dynamics and the process of empire building. In order to reconstruct the process of American empire building, the paper examines food as one of the many clashes between the U.S. and Spain, and as a mediation area in which Americans acted as agents of empire. Following the approach of new imperial history and of culinary nationalism, food is also employed here as an instrument of distinction through which the Americans perceived themselves as different, or better, ‘superior’, from both the indigenous Cubans and their Spanish colonizers.¹ Finally, American discourse on Spanish food will be connected to the broader debate on the formation of the U.S. Empire in its backyard and, at the same time, on the denigration of the Spanish Empire.

Thus, by building on the developments of new imperial history, this paper will examine:

[...] recesses of colonial life, looking at subjects [but also areas] that once were hidden from sight and unworthy of scrutiny. It attempts to reconstruct the lived experiences of the people of the empire, famous, infamous or largely unknown [...] It moves beyond traditional boundaries, either those that divided the colonising countries from each other or the borders that they imposed on their colonies; it discovers many transnational commonalities and links.²

Moreover, as indicated by Michael LaCombe in the case of the English Atlantic, when colonists produced, exchanged, ate, or described food, ‘they conveyed dense and interlaced messages about status, gender, civility, diplomacy, and authority’.³ Therefore, the paper evaluates if food was an instrument used by Americans to denigrate the declining Spanish empire and, at the same time, to bolster their informal emerging empire during the second half of the nineteenth century.⁴ The questions discussed in this paper concern Americans’ distaste for garlic in Cuba: their descriptions of the apparently disgusting and malodorous Spanish cuisine; how food was used as an effective instrument to undermine the existing Spanish empire in order to increase and consolidate American power; the construction of a ‘positive’ American identity in contrast to Spanish identity through something as ordinary as garlic. Finally, this paper considers if the informal discourse on Spanish cuisine was part of a wider process of ‘culinary nationalism’, a process of constructing similarities and differences through food.

In doing so particular care is taken when examining the various meanings Americans gave to local food and in the Spanish colony of Cuba.

A note on sources and on context

During the second half of the nineteenth century, Cuba was precariously balanced between the weakening Spanish rule on the one hand and mounting United States economic influence on the other. It was also a period of deep and rapid transformation for the Cuban economy, where its wealth became based mainly on sugar cane cultivation. Despite Spain’s formal authority, the island was of growing strategic economic importance for the U.S. Many Americans bought plantations, established companies and shipping agencies, gave credit and contributed to the development of a modern, hi-tech communication and transport system.⁵ Cuba and its

economy became gradually dependent on the United States and less bound to the Spanish Empire. Increasingly, during the second half of the nineteenth century, the American government's expansionist tendencies towards Cuba were discussed daily both on the island and in the United States. For instance, in 1848 and 1854, the Polk and Pierce administrations, respectively, offered to buy Cuba from Spain for millions of dollars.⁶ The economic interchanges between U.S. and Cuba caused, indeed, the mass arrival of Americans involved in sugar transactions, at the point that Joseph Dimock, an American journalist who visited Cuba in 1859, wrote 'there are Americans in all parts of the island.'⁷ There was, actually, a community of 2,500 Americans in the capital, Havana, and every year 5,000 U.S. tourists visited the island, a good number of whom left written documents, useful to investigate the process of culinary nationalism, a concern of this paper.⁸

Americans description of the garlicky Spanish cuisine in Cuba

It is clear from many American travellers' accounts that garlic was the most despised ingredient in food and was always associated with the Spanish domination of the island. The American traveller Campbell, who resided on the island during the second half of the 1860s, recalled that:

There are slaves, who cook and grin [...] The house is very noisy, and pervaded by smells which are anything but inviting — garlic, of course, being predominant. The cooking, in my opinion, is abominable, as I suppose Spanish cooking generally is to a stranger.⁹

Campbell's description of the all pervading smell of garlic in the kitchen as 'anything but inviting'¹⁰ was also shared by Maturin Ballou, a Bostonian traveller, writer and publisher who spent some time in Cuba during the first half of the 1850s:

As to the mode of cooking, it seems to be very like the French, though the universal garlic, which appears to be a positive necessity to a Spanish palate, is very apt to form a disagreeable preponderance in the flavor [sic] of every dish. Fish, meat and fowl are so disguised with this article [...]. The vegetable soups of the city houses (but for the garlic) are excellent.¹¹

Clearly, the American's aversion to the local cuisine concerned 'the universal garlic'¹² that gave 'a disagreeable preponderance in the flavour of every dish'.¹³

In 1853, *Harper's Magazine* included a feature entitled 'Three Weeks in Cuba', a short travel diary written by an anonymous 'artist' that was used by some travellers as a sort of guidebook.¹⁴ In his account, the artist wrote about the difficulties Americans in Cuba faced when eating in local taverns:

The bill of fare [of the taverns] is exceedingly simple and brief, and almost every dish of prepared food is highly flavored [sic] with offensive garlic. The traveler [sic] may resort to a meal of bananas, rice, and eggs, if they can be procured until his taste becomes 'acclimated' which happy state he is soon attained under the severe regimen of hunger and a keen appetite, and garlic loses a degree of its offensiveness to palate and nostrils. Sometimes the traveller may be favored [sic] with jerked-beef and codfish, and even with milk and chickens. These, however, are reckoned among rarities, and the tavern is a comfortable place only for the *arrieros* (pack-mule drivers) and the *carreteros*.¹⁵

The dishes available in Cuban taverns were so heavily seasoned with garlic that travellers would only be able to eat them after they had become accustomed to its aroma. Initially, they found the smell to be 'offensive'¹⁶ both to the traveller's mouth and nose.

Conclusion

According to an anthropological point of view, the Americans' aversion to garlicky Spanish cuisine should be evaluated as an instrument to mark different identities - the cultural borders between two different nations that shared the same physical environment. Could the consumption of garlic be seen as an invented taboo through which American citizens in Cuba could lose their identity by eating putrid Spanish cuisine? Could we see Americans as agents of the empire by rejecting Spanish cuisine in Cuba if we situate their discourse on food in the broader context of constructing a dominant cultural identity to undermine Spanish power?

The U.S. documents describe the disgust of American travellers regarding the smell and taste of Spanish cuisine in Cuba in many meals. The hypothesis of this paper is that the fundamental attitude emerging from the documents - contempt for Spanish food heavily seasoned with garlic - was designed to help the U.S. replace Spanish authority in Cuba. The analysis of the documents allows an understanding that discourse relating to food was functional to the expansionist goals of the United States in its 'backyard' and used as a powerful means to contribute to the devaluation and the vilification, if not the destruction, of the declining Spanish Empire in the Cuba. Therefore, the refusal to eat and contempt for an commonly used and defining ingredient of Spanish cuisine in Cuba, should be seen through the lens of the United States' growing sense of superiority and otherness.

About the author

Ilaria Berti completed a Marie Curie postdoctoral research fellowship on *Imperial Recipes* at Pablo de Olavide

University, Seville, Spain. She is currently preparing a monograph based on the same research. Her investigation concerns the cultural history of food in the British and Spanish colonies of the West Indies during the 19th century and examines how food was used to build the colonists' identities. Berti is now moving to a new research project in which she will investigate culinary nationalism in Cuba during the second half of 19th century and the ways in which North Americans used discourse on food as a powerful means to devalue and substitute the declining Spanish Empire on the island.

Note

This paper is part of two Spanish national research projects, *Globalización ibérica: redes entre Asia y Europa y los cambios en las pautas de consumo en Latinoamérica* (HAR2014-53797-P) and *Historia de la Globalización: violencia, negociación e interculturalidad* (PAIDI HUM 1000).

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2. Aldrich, Robert, McKenzie, Kristen, *Why Colonialism?*, in Aldrich, Robert, McKenzie, Kristen (eds.), *The Routledge History of Western Empires*, Routledge, London and New York, p. 10.
3. LaCombe, Michael A., *Political Gastronomy. Food and Authority in the English Atlantic World*, University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia, 2012, p. 3.
4. On the role of food in the construction of national identities see Cozzi, Annette, *The Discourses of Food in Nineteenth Century British Fiction*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York, 2010; McWilliams, Mark, *Distant Tables: Food and the Novel in Early America*, in 'Early American Literature', Vol.38, n.3, (2003), pp. 365-393; Helstosky, Carol, *Recipe for the Nation: Reading Italian History Through La Scienza in Cucina and La Cucina Futurista*, in 'Food and Foodways', 11, 2-3, (2003), pp. 113-140; Lee Perez, Ramona, Abarca, Meredith, *Cocinas Publicas: Food and Border Consciousness in Greater Mexico*, in 'Food and Foodways', 15, (2007), pp. 137-151; Ray, Krishnendu, *Nation and Cuisine. The Evidence from American Newspapers, Ca. 1830-2003*, in 'Food and Foodways', 16, 4, (2008), pp. 259-297; Pilcher, Jeffrey, *Tamales or Timbales: Cuisine and Formation of Mexican National Identity*, in 'The Americas', Vol.53, n.2, (Oct. 1996), pp. 193-216.
5. These are the descriptions of the technological advancement in Cuba during the 1850s: Steam and the telegraph are revolutionizing all business relations and the course of trade. A line of steamers, one of the best in the world, runs between New York and Havana, also New Orleans and Havana. By this means all important intelligence reaches Cuba in advance of any other source, and through this country. By the telegraph, Havana is brought within three days' communication with New York and Boston. All-important advices must continue to reach the island through the United States, and the people must still look to this country for political and commercial information, and to the movement of our markets for the regulation of their own trade and commerce. New Orleans has become the great centre to which their interests will naturally tend; and thus we see another strong tie of common interest established between the island of Cuba and the United States. In Ballou, Maturin M., *History of Cuba or, Notes of a Traveller in the Tropics*, Phillips, Sampson and Company, Boston, 1854, p. 199.
6. For a theory of a traveller on the reasons for which Spain would not sell Cuba to United States see, for instance, Ballou, p. 56: A peaceful solution to the question of Cuba, by its sale to the United States, is not regarded as probable by the best-informed Creoles. They say that, even if the queen were disposed to sell the island, it would be impossible to obtain the consent of the Cortes. The integrity of the Spanish domain, including all the islands, is protected by legal enactment; and it would require the abrogation of a fundamental law before it could be consummated. Now, the Spanish subjects well understand that they would not be likely to be gainers by the sale of Cuba, however large a sum the United States might be willing to pay for it, while the monopoly to trade, the bestowal of lucrative insular offices on Spaniards alone, and other incidental advantages, give them a direct interest in the maintenance of the present order of things. Those who take this view of the question say that if Spain has not promptly rejected the overtures supposed to have been made by our minister at Madrid, this delay indicates only a conscious weakness, and not any hesitation of purpose. It is simply a diplomatic trick—a temporizing policy. Why, they ask, if Spain had any idea of parting with the island, would she be making naval and military preparations on a grand and costly scale, at home, while in the island she is making large levies, and enrolling coloured troops, not as militia, as the government has falsely given out, but as regulars? We are reluctant to abandon the hope of our purchasing the island, but candour compels us to state the plausible arguments of those who assert that no success can possibly attend the plan for its peaceable acquisition.
7. Ballou, p. 40. Even in Anonymous, *Cuba and the Cubans*, Samuel Hueston, New York, 1850, pp. v-vi where there were described the expansionist objectives of the raising U.S. power. In the Introduction to the volume, the anonymous author claimed that both United Kingdom and USA showed 'eager interest' for Cuba. He also claimed that 'with or without the United States, [Cuba] will soon be free from Spanish

dominion'. However, without any help or influence from foreign powers, Cuban, freed from Spanish dominion. Will fall under the influence of UK, dangerous perspective for the U.S: 'How will the United States relish the possession by that nation of a point which commands the Gulf of Mexico and the mouth of Mississippi?'

8. Ballou, pp. ix-xiv. See also Perez, Louis, *Cuba and the United States: Ties of Singular Intimacy*, University of Georgia Press, Athens, 1990; Perez, Louis, *On Becoming Cuban: Identity, Nationality and Culture*, University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill, 1999; Perez, Louis (ed.), *Slaves, Sugar, and Colonial Society: Travel Accounts of Cuba, 1801-1899*, Scholarly Resources Press, Wilmington, 1992; Bergad, Laird W.,

Cuban Rural Society in the Nineteenth Century: The Social and Economic History of Monoculture in Matanzas, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1990.

9. Campbell, The Marquis of Lorne, *A Trip to the Tropics and Home Through America*, Hurst and Blackett Publishers, 1867, pp. 156-157.
 10. Campbell.
 11. Ballou, p. 123.
 12. Ballou.
 13. Ballou.
 14. An artist, *Three Weeks in Cuba*, in 'Harper's Magazine' Vol. vi, December 1852 to May 1853, Harpers and Brothers, New York, 1853.
 15. An artist, p. 164.
 16. An artist.