

A labour of freedom: 'free wombs' and slave emancipation in postcolonial Uruguay

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Abstract

The workings of the transitions from slavery to freedom shaped development paths in the Americas. I rely on a new dataset based on manuscript population listings to offer the first quantitative analysis of selective slave emancipation in postcolonial Uruguay, where by 1836 a third of people of African descent were free. Freedom came primarily through their own labour—both in the sense of working and giving birth—in an institutional context which was at best indifferent to their destiny, as only 5% of them directly benefited from the 'free wombs' reform. Reflecting racial status hierarchies, people born in Africa and those of darker complexion were more likely to remain enslaved. Using a probit model to control for the effects of age, origin, gender, and other covariates, I show that Black people were more likely to be free in smallholder rural areas, especially less fertile ones. Such results suggest that the lack of any policy towards freedpeople led to an embedding of racial inequality onto *de facto* resource allocation before the *de jure* abolition of slavery in 1852.

The legacies of slavery in Latin and North America are the subject of a vast scholarship in economics, history, and the social sciences more generally. There is a large and diverse empirical literature exploring how the characteristics of slave systems in different countries (scale, profitability, productivity, treatment of slaves) shaped long-term development.¹ While these aspects are undoubtedly relevant, the specific workings of the transitions from slavery to freedom are also crucial to understand historical legacies. New World societies received for over three centuries (with a peak in 18th and early-19th) the largest inflow of enslaved people in history. Subsequent transitions from coerced to free labour began c.1820-1870, coinciding with the so-called 'lost decades' in Latin American economic history. Most studies of these transitions have focused on legislative action and on the ideology and tactics of abolitionist social movements which led to all slaves in a jurisdiction being emancipated at the same time.² However, in parts of Latin America where slavery had been a major form of labour organization, emancipation was a less a moment than a lengthy process during which some people became free through self-purchase or under gradualist policies such as 'free-wombs' laws. Despite its importance in shaping post-colonial societies, selective emancipation before abolition has received comparatively little attention, especially from the point of view of quantitative

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¹ The literature is truly vast and cannot be summarised here. It includes classics in the economic history of the Americas, such as *El ingenio* and *Time on the Cross*. A good introduction is Klein and Vinson, *African slavery*; for a review and a test of key hypotheses on slavery's economic impact in the Americas, see Nunn, 'Slavery'.

² Good overviews are Drescher, *Slavery, Abolition*, and Engerman, 'Emancipation'. Excellent examples of comparative analyses of abolition in the Americas are Scott, *Degrees of Freedom*, Blackburn, *American Crucible*, and Payne, 'General Insurrection'.

history.³ How much did gradualist policies effectively contribute to slave emancipation? What factors made someone's freedom more or less likely? How did free Black families⁴ sustain their livelihoods?

I take up these long-running questions through a quantitative case study of slave emancipation in postcolonial Uruguay before the formal abolition of slavery in 1852. Besides having been comparatively overlooked, the case of Uruguay can be particularly revealing because it fell under Brazilian control after achieving independence from Spain, and so experienced colonial rule by the two powers which upheld slavery the longest in the Americas.⁵ Twentieth-century Uruguay became one of the most egalitarian countries in Latin America, but by global standards its levels of income inequality have remained high, which arguably contributed to its poor growth performance in the long-run.⁶ Uruguay's wealth inequality levels have also been shown to be very high in international comparison.⁷ As elsewhere in the Americas, recent research reveals that people with African ancestry (about 10% of Uruguay's population today) face systematic gaps in terms of human capital, wages, unemployment, poverty, and wealth.⁸ Yet, we do not have any quantitative studies about how these inequalities emerged when independent Uruguay was created or how they evolved afterwards.⁹

After this introduction, Section I introduces the reader to post-independence Latin America and Uruguay and draws the contours of slave emancipation in that context. Section II presents a new dataset constructed from archival sources that allows us, for the first time, to measure the likelihood of freedom among people of African descent in Uruguay in the aftermath of independence. The third section combines description and quantitative analysis of the dataset to test a series of expectations regarding slave emancipation, drawn from the specialist historiography on Uruguay as well as from historical studies in other contexts. Section IV discusses these results in dialogue with the comparative empirical literature on manumission and emancipation, considering also insights from economic theory and historical sociology. The conclusion reflects on how a better understanding of the workings of the transition from slavery to free labour can cast new light on the long-term impact of Latin America's so-called 'lost decades' after independence.

³ Patterson, 'Manumission', 23. Notable exceptions are Bodenhorn, 'Manumission' and Lewis, 'Transition'; and, only analysing descriptive statistics, Bergad, Iglesias García, and Barcia, *Cuban slave market*, 122-42 as well as Brana-Shute, 'Approaching freedom' and 'Sex and Gender'.

⁴ In the context and sources of this paper the term 'Black' refers to people born in Africa who were forcefully transported to Uruguay and to their first-, second-, and third-generation descendants.

⁵ Schmidt-Nowara, 'Empires'.

⁶ Bértola, 'A 50 años'.

⁷ De Rosa, 'Wealth'.

⁸ Individuals without African ancestry are twice as likely to complete tertiary education; men with African ancestry earn 30% less than their white counterparts; unemployment is 50% higher for females with African ancestry compared to other women; households of people with African ancestry are twice as likely to be poor; households without African ancestry have more than twice as much wealth, owing partially to discrimination in access to credit (Bucheli and Porzecanski, 'Racial Inequality'; Cabella, Nathan, and Tenembaum, *Población; Weathersby*, 'Wealth').

⁹ This is partially due to a lack of sources: the Republic of Uruguay only recorded the number people of African birth in its first official census (1852), without reporting any details nor the number of their descendants, and later census did not record racial or family history information until 2011.

I. CONTEXT

Most Latin American countries secured independence from European powers by the 1820s. Their subsequent economic record is now conventionally seen by global economic historians as a harsh mirror for other regions liberated from colonial rule: ‘conflict, violence, and instability’ leading to an ‘abysmal’ growth performance: ‘lost decades indeed’.¹⁰ The narrative is one of unfulfilled promise, of ‘decades of economic stagnation rooted in the dilemmas of the colonial society’.¹¹ This rhymes with enduring tropes about the region and seems to give them a historical genealogy: following independence, the inequalities of Iberian colonial society coalesced into Latin America’s tendency to perpetual political unrest, underneath which the fundamentals of its economic backwardness stood still.¹²

Several scholars have questioned the empirical evidence for stagnation and highlighted the diversity in Latin American paths out of the colonial period,¹³ but the ‘lost decades’ thesis remains the conventional wisdom in the economic history of early-independent Latin America.¹⁴ And yet, even if the hopes surrounding the independence revolutions were not fulfilled, these cannot meaningfully be called ‘lost decades’ for economic development even we were to agree that GDP growth was underwhelming—and the quality of historical national accounts makes that assessment almost impossible in many cases. In particular, during these ‘lost decades’ many slaves found ways to achieve freedom and economic autonomy before the formal abolition of slavery, which also occurred mostly in this period. Indeed, as the case of Uruguay will show, these decades were not ‘lost’ on slaves who achieved emancipation for themselves and their families.

The broad contours of slave emancipation in ‘lost decades’ Latin America can be sketched as follows: (i) slavery was initially only challenged in countries which experienced a revolutionary war of independence: there was no substantial change in Brazil, Cuba, or Puerto Rico until the 1870s;¹⁵ (ii) nowhere was slavery disrupted without compensating masters in cash or through labour time over many years;¹⁶ (iii) slavery was dismantled faster where it was less prevalent, such as in Chile, Mexico, and the Central American republics;¹⁷ and (iv) slave emancipation before abolition has proven difficult to measure because of the source lacunae caused by lack of state capacity in the young republics and political unrest leading to precious few population records and very poor rates of source survival.

‘Free-wombs’ laws (*leyes de vientre libre*) were emblematic of the slavery policy of most new Latin American nations. They were a compromise solution that avoided the fiscal cost of paying compensation to slaveowners or attacking their immediate economic interests, while allowing the

¹⁰ Bates, Coatsworth, and Williamson, ‘Lost Decades’, 925.

¹¹ Allen, *Global Economic History*, 84.

¹² Landes, *Wealth and Poverty*, 313. The origins of this interpretation (albeit in a much more nuanced version) can be traced back to Halperin Donghi’s classic *Historia contemporánea*. A somewhat similar argument, although in explicit comparison with North America, can be found in North, Summerhill, and Weingast, ‘Order’.

¹³ See, respectively, Prados de la Escosura, ‘Lost Decades?’ and Llopis and Marichal, ‘Latinoamérica’; Gelman, ‘Senderos’; Gelman, ‘Crisis postcolonial’.

¹⁴ The thesis is espoused by Bulmer-Thomas’s *Economic History*, 45, by Bértola and Ocampo, *Economic Development*, and in the relevant chapter of the *Cambridge History of Latin America* (Halperin Donghi, ‘Economy and society’). The exception in the textbook landscape is a chapter in the *Cambridge Economic History of Latin America*, which takes a more nuanced view (Prados de la Escosura, ‘Economic consequences’).

¹⁵ These countries had not experienced (not yet, in Cuba’s case) an independence war, were not republics by the mid-nineteenth century, and only enacted free-womb laws in the 1870s. See, respectively, Chalhoub, *A força da escravidão*, 23–31, Scott, *Slave Emancipation*, 67–73, and Figueroa, *Sugar*, 107–20.

¹⁶ Engerman and Sokoloff, ‘Economic differences’, 23.

¹⁷ Mörner, ‘Afro-Uruguayans’, 213; Bértola and Ocampo, *Desarrollo económico*, 93–94.

new republics to take an international stance against slavery and somewhat recognise the contribution of Africans and their descendants to revolutionary armies.¹⁸ Under these free-wombs laws, slaves' children were born free, but existing slaves remained enslaved and slavery still legitimate. Newly born children had to serve their mothers' masters as minors, and became free citizens of the republic at age 18, 21, or 25, as the threshold was repeatedly extended in several countries, including Uruguay.¹⁹

If we think of a continuum of postcolonial slavery policies between the outright abolition of slavery in Haiti's first constitution (1805) and its emphatic upholding in the 1850 constitution of Kentucky, Uruguay was, like most of Latin America, somewhere in between. The Uruguayan program of independence (1825) and first constitution (1830) included a free-birth law and banned international slave-trading, but slaves were not emancipated and slavery itself not questioned. Despite what has long been taught in Uruguay's schools, this policy can hardly be taken as evidence of the progressive credentials of the white creole elite.²⁰ Slavery was only abolished by the Uruguayan government in 1852, following a long civil war in which both sides promised freedom to slaves who would fight for them.

The course of abolition in Uruguay was slow not only because slavery itself was not abolished at independence, but also because slave importing, even after it was banned, continued to flourish, unlike in other Latin American republics.²¹ As the *Slave Voyages* database shows, Río de la Plata was the only Spanish American region which imported substantial numbers of slaves after 1820, and thousands of slaves were transported under Uruguay's flag in the 1830s, even after the formal abolition of slave importing under the first constitution.²² In the decades that followed slave trading became less brazen but remained consequential, if smaller in scale. The history of illegitimate slave trading in early Uruguay has only recently started to be explored, and it included trans-Atlantic transportation of so-called 'African colonists' as well as overland people-smuggling along the vast northern border with Brazil.²³

Whether the motive was political expediency, a lack of ideological commitment to abolition, or both, Uruguay's 'free-wombs' law meant that anyone born to slave parents before 1830 would, in principle, remain a slave for life. Importantly, economic agents did not think that this institutional change was spelling out the end of slavery as a labour system any time soon. After all, the president who oversaw this legislation owned slaves and extended official licenses to import African people, while parliament officially approved charging custom duties from slave-traders even if trafficking was constitutionally banned.²⁴ While slavery was resilient as a regime, individual paths to freedom through manumission were open. Slaves could save the money necessary to pay for their manumission because they were allowed to keep some of the pay for 'extra' work done on Sundays or holidays, or whenever they were 'rented out' to another master, a practice known locally as 'conchabo' (see Figure 1C).²⁵ They could also borrow the manumission cost from a lender and then

¹⁸ Bértola and Ocampo, *Economic Development*, 74-75; Bulmer-Thomas, *Economic History*, 30; Klein and Vinson, *African slavery*, 231-33.

¹⁹ Rama, 'Afro-uruguayos', 86; Andrews, *Afro-Latin America*, 63-64.

²⁰ Andrews, *Afro-Uruguay*, 18-20.

²¹ Davis, *Problem of slavery*, 67.

²² The Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database (2020). *SlaveVoyages*. <https://www.slavevoyages.org> (accessed May 16, 2023).

²³ Borucki, 'African Colonists'; Palermo, 'Cautivos'; Thul, 'Traficantes'.

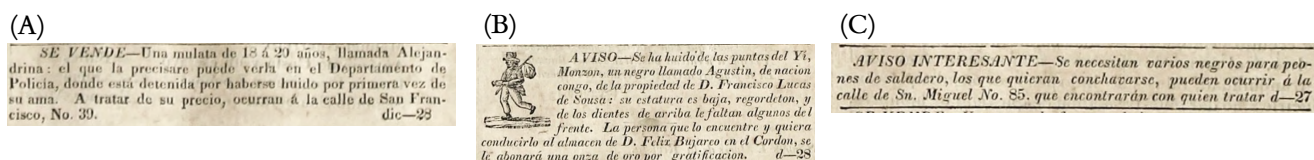
²⁴ Acevedo, *Anales I*, 496-97; Borucki, '250 años', 282.

²⁵ Borucki, 'Del juzgado', 162, 66; Thul, 'Trabajo libre'.

work off that loan.²⁶ As Dari-Mattiacci has argued building on Fenoaltea's insights, these arrangements made economic sense especially in cases where masters needed to offer positive incentives to slaves, an issue to which we will return.²⁷

Advertisements in Uruguayan newspapers from the 1830s and early 1840s are a good window into the character of slavery in this period, as well as serving as an expression of public faith in the regime's resilience. Figure 1 shows examples taken from just one single page of a Uruguayan newspaper, which advertised slaves for sale, called for the capture of several runaways, and offered temporary 'extra' employment for slaves to take up. While the legal framework of the emerging republic did not explicitly allow or regulate the domestic trade in slaves, it remained very much above the board: even the police facilitated the sale of slaves they recaptured (Figure 1A). Fleeing the estate or house where they worked continued to be a risk worth taking for many slaves, who must also have believed that slavery was likely to persist for quite some time. Runaways were still persecuted by the police and regularly denounced in newspapers (Figure 1B). Rewards for capturing them and returning them to their masters were substantial and, in a context of monetary uncertainty following the creation of the new republic, were often paid directly in gold.

Figure 1. Slaves' sale, capture, and temporary employment notices in a newspaper, 3 January 1839



(A) FOR SALE. A Mulatto woman 18 years old by the name of Alejandrina; whoever is interested can see her at the Department of Police, where she is detained for having escaped for the first time. To discuss her price, visit calle de San Francisco, number 39. (B) NOTICE. A negro named Agustín, of the Congo nation and property of Don Francisco Lucas de Souza, has escaped from Puntas del Yí [a village]: he is of short stature, stout body, and of the top teeth he is missing a few. The person who finds him and takes him to Don Félix Buxareo's warehouse will receive an ounce of gold for reward. (C) INTERESTING NOTICE. Several negroes are needed as labourers for a beef jerky establishment [*saladero*], those who would like to be temporarily employed [*conchabarse*], can come to calle de San Miguel where they can discuss.

Sources: Biblioteca Nacional Newspaper Collection, Montevideo. *Revista Oficial*, 3 January 1839, page 4.

This slow and complicated transition from coercion to free labour was for a long time neglected by Uruguayan historiography because slavery was wrongly depicted as negligible.²⁸ Over the last two decades, historians have produced substantial reassessments of the scale and scope of slavery and slave-trading since the late-colonial period, when Montevideo was second only to Havana as a slave port in Spanish America and Black people represented almost a third of its population.²⁹ Moreover, scholars have, through microhistories, shown that Black people found paths to freedom between the end of colonial rule and the abolition of slavery in 1851.³⁰ While very revealing, this evidence remains impressionistic. We have so far no quantitative studies of the Africans and Afro-Uruguayans who achieved freedom, which factors made their emancipation more likely, and to what extent was this the direct result of the 'free-wombs' legislation. The next section introduces a new dataset which can cast some light on these questions.

²⁶ These mechanisms existed also in colonial times, but manumission rates were low, at most 0.9% yearly between 1790–1820 (Andrews, *Afro-Uruguay*, 23–24; Rama, 'Afro-Uruguayans', 33; Johnson, 'Manumission').

²⁷ Dari-Mattiacci, 'Slavery'; Fenoaltea, 'Slavery'.

²⁸ Andrews, *Afro-Uruguay*; Borucki, 'Esclavitud'.

²⁹ Frega et al., 'Esclavitud'; Borucki, Eltis, and Wheat, 'Atlantic History'; Adelman, *Sovereignty*, 63–64.

³⁰ Frega, 'Patria'.

II. DATA

There are no large quantitative datasets about slavery in postcolonial Uruguay. We do know that in the last colonial census of Montevideo and its countryside (1805), Black people accounted for 30% of total population.³¹ Over 85% of them were slaves, a higher proportion than in neighbouring Buenos Aires or Brazilian slave port cities.³² The demography of the surrounding countryside was similar: about 25% of the population was of African descent by 1778.³³ In 1810, 30% of the population in Montevideo's jurisdiction (including rural areas) was enslaved, a rate similar to the American Carolinas according to the 1790 US Census.³⁴ No population censuses were taken between the beginning of the independence war against Spain (1811) and the end of the 'Guerra Grande' (a long civil war) in 1852, when slavery was formally abolished.³⁵

I construct a new dataset from primary sources to describe and analyse the ways in which Black people, families and communities laboured for freedom in early postcolonial Uruguay. The core of the dataset is built on over 60 local population listings taken in 1834–36 and containing data for over 9,200 individual Black people in Uruguay. These listings (*padrones*) correspond to districts known as *partidos* which could include several hamlets, one village or town, or a neighbourhood of a city. They survive in manuscript enumerators' books (Figure 2) which remain in the archives from the national government's attempt to hold a population count in order to reallocate provincial seats in parliament. Most of the books are in Spanish; a few were written in Portuguese (this was, after all, only a decade after the end of Brazilian occupation). This population count was a requirement of the first constitution (1830) and Uruguay's second president ordered them to be completed by 1836: a few were taken in 1834 and most in 1836.³⁶ In late 1836 there was an uprising led by Fructuoso Rivera, the previous president, which possibly led several of these enumerators' books to be lost.³⁷ I transcribed all individual listings which have survived through the accidents of source survival and of preservation (there are three enumerators' books which are accessible but illegible because of their exposure to humidity). These represent a large sample of observations which have never been used as a set of sources for systematic quantitative analysis exploiting geographical differences before. Previous studies have used transcriptions from these sources to produce detailed analysis of occupational structures in some areas.³⁸

While they are not a random sample, scholars have considered the surviving *padrones* as representative of the country as a whole and as revealing sources to study slavery and emancipation.³⁹ Furthermore, given the tiny size of Uruguay's population at the time, which reached 132,000 people by the time of the 1852 census (before large-scale European immigration started), the over 25,000 individual observations in the enumerators' books in 1836, including also the non-Black population, comprise a respectable share of the total, and they include several districts in the most densely populated rural areas (the south and south-west, see Appendix).⁴⁰ In the context of the source hiatus of the decades following independence in Latin America, especially when it comes to quantitative

³¹ Borucki, *Shipmates to Soldiers*, 25–26.

³² Borucki, 'Slave trade', 85; Johnson, *Workshop of Revolution*, 37.

³³ Sluyter, *Black Ranching Frontiers*, 148.

³⁴ Pérez, 'Montevideo'; United States, *Return*, 4.

³⁵ Rial, 'Sources'; Pellegrino, *Población*.

³⁶ Pivel Devoto and Ranieri, *Historia*, 219–20; Arredondo, 'Apuntes'; Reyes Abadie and Vázquez Romero, *Crónica General* 4, 41–42.

³⁷ Acevedo, *Anales*, I, 493–4.

³⁸ Moraes, *Pradera*, 58–71; Moraes and Pollero, 'Categorías ocupacionales'.

³⁹ Rial, 'Sources'; Williams, 'Bondage'.

⁴⁰ Large-scale European immigration began in earnest in the 1850s; by 1875 Uruguay's population had risen to 450,000; by 1908 to 1.1 million (Rial, *Estadísticas*; Sánchez-Albornoz, 'Population').

data on slavery, their light shines particularly bright. The vast majority of Black people found in these sources are explicitly classified as either free (*libre*, or less often *liberto*, *liberta*) or enslaved (*esclavo*, *esclava*). A very small percentage of total observations (3.5%) was instead classified as ‘servant’ (*criado*, *criada*) or as ‘colonist’ (*colono*, *colona*). Given the meaning of those words in early-independent Uruguay and following the cases where these terms were also accompanied by an explicit indication of freedom status, I have classified the *criados* as free and the ‘colonists’ as enslaved, but the results do not change if we exclude these observations or interpret these categories differently.⁴¹

Figure 2. Example page from an enumerator book, 1836.

Nombre	Edad	Sexo	Estado	Profesion	Color	Religion	Letras	Estado	Profesion	Color	Religion	Letras
Don Juan de Dios	27	Varón	Libre	Comerciante	Blanco	Católico	Letras					
Doña María de los Angeles	38	Mujer	Libre	Comerciante	Blanca	Católica	Letras					
Don Juan de Dios	44	Varón	Libre	Comerciante	Blanco	Católico	Letras					
Doña María de los Angeles	40	Mujer	Libre	Comerciante	Blanca	Católica	Letras					
Don Juan de Dios	8	Varón	Libre	Comerciante	Blanco	Católico	Letras					
Doña María de los Angeles	8	Mujer	Libre	Comerciante	Blanca	Católica	Letras					
Don Juan de Dios	9	Varón	Libre	Comerciante	Blanco	Católico	Letras					
Doña María de los Angeles	7	Mujer	Libre	Comerciante	Blanca	Católica	Letras					
Don Juan de Dios	3	Varón	Libre	Comerciante	Blanco	Católico	Letras					
Doña María de los Angeles	5	Mujer	Libre	Comerciante	Blanca	Católica	Letras					
Don Juan de Dios	2	Varón	Libre	Comerciante	Blanco	Católico	Letras					
Doña María de los Angeles	2	Mujer	Libre	Comerciante	Blanca	Católica	Letras					
Don Juan de Dios	20	Varón	Libre	Comerciante	Blanco	Católico	Letras					
Doña María de los Angeles	21	Mujer	Libre	Comerciante	Blanca	Católica	Letras					
Don Juan de Dios	12	Varón	Libre	Comerciante	Blanco	Católico	Letras					
Doña María de los Angeles	10	Mujer	Libre	Comerciante	Blanca	Católica	Letras					
Don Juan de Dios	10	Varón	Libre	Comerciante	Blanco	Católico	Letras					
Doña María de los Angeles	21	Mujer	Libre	Comerciante	Blanca	Católica	Letras					
Don Juan de Dios	18	Varón	Libre	Comerciante	Blanco	Católico	Letras					
Doña María de los Angeles	19	Mujer	Libre	Comerciante	Blanca	Católica	Letras					
Don Juan de Dios	17	Varón	Libre	Comerciante	Blanco	Católico	Letras					
Doña María de los Angeles	6	Mujer	Libre	Comerciante	Blanca	Católica	Letras					
Don Juan de Dios	55	Varón	Libre	Comerciante	Blanco	Católico	Letras					
Doña María de los Angeles	55	Mujer	Libre	Comerciante	Blanca	Católica	Letras					
Don Juan de Dios	35	Varón	Libre	Comerciante	Blanco	Católico	Letras					

Source: author's photograph, Archivo General de la Nación (Montevideo).

The resulting dataset is complemented with a set of covariates recorded at the district level (Table 1). These include geographical covariates georeferenced or calculated from other sources (latitude, longitude, temperature, rainfall, distance to Montevideo, distance to the Brazilian border, and wheat suitability) and some covariates taken from the *padrones* themselves: whether the district was urban or semi-urban (i.e. part of the jurisdiction of a town) or rural, and the extent of cattle raising as revealed by household heads' occupations.

⁴¹ The fiction of African ‘settlers’ or ‘colonists’ was used in the 1830s by Montevidean and Rio de Janeiro-based slave-traders to avoid both Uruguay’s constitutional ban and the British persecution of slave ships. See Borucki, ‘African Colonists’. On *criados* see Rama, ‘Afro-uruguayos’.

Table 1. Summary statistics for selected variables: sample of people of African descent, 1836

	<i>N</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>Std. dev.</i>	<i>Min.</i>	<i>Max.</i>
Freedom (0=slave, 1=free)	9,217	0.35	0.47	0	1
Age (years)	7,208	25.9	16.6	0	100
Gender (1=female)	9,145	0.44	0.49	0	1
Creole (0=born in Africa, 1=born in South America)	9,229	0.61	0.49	0	1
Complexion (0='black', 1='mulatto')	9,229	0.09	0.29	0	1
Civil status (0=single, 1=married or widowed)	5,374	0.24	0.43	0	1
Rurality (1=lives outside town jurisdiction)	9,229	0.29	0.45	0	1
Cattle-raising area (=1 if >30% of households raise cattle)	9,229	0.18	0.38	0	1
Wheat suitability in district (0–100 index)	9,229	86.5	13.9	12.7	100
Temperature (annual mean, degrees Celsius)	9,229	16.6	0.25	16.0	17.5
Rainfall in district (yearly average, millimetres)	9,229	926	74.5	720	1,122
District's distance to Montevideo (kms from centroid)	9,229	70.2	94.7	0	404
District's distance to Brazil (kms from centroid)	9,229	333	61	148	542
Latitude of location (degrees south)	9,229	34.2	0.5	34.5	32.1
Longitude of location (degrees west)	9,229	56.1	0.6	58.2	54.2

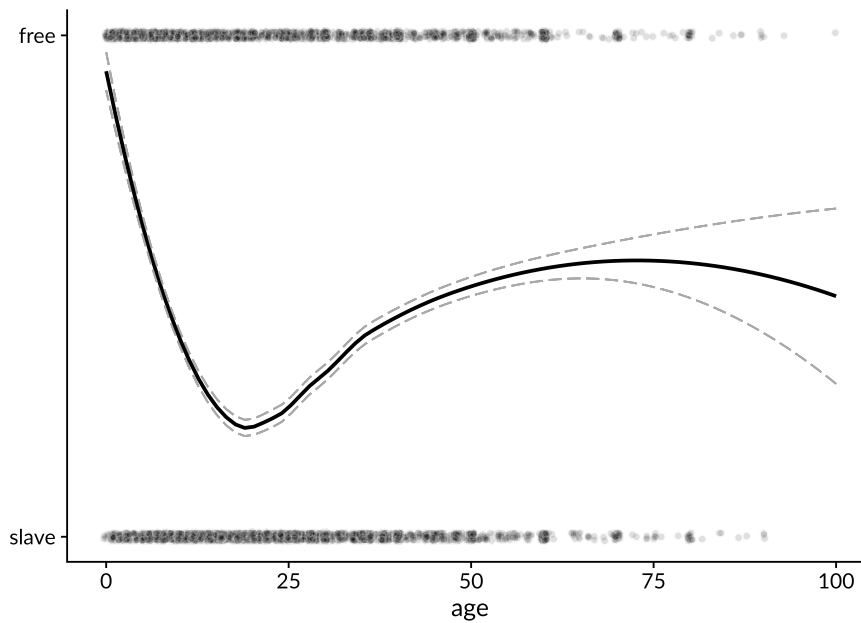
Sources: wheat suitability refers to rainfed, low-input agriculture; the data is taken from the FAO–Gaez database and the average suitability value in a 10 kilometre radius is calculated for each settlement. The FAO suitability index has a range of 0–10,000; I have rescaled the range to 0–100. Rainfall and temperature calculated with data from Travieso, 'Soils'. All other variables: Archivo General de la Nación (Montevideo). Archivo General Administrativo / Libros 271, 279, 273, 278, 277, 276, 283, 288, 465.

III. RESULTS

The enumerators' books reveal that slavery remained important as a labour system in early-independent Uruguay. Slave-owning was relatively widespread—one in five free households owned slaves in a fairly flat distribution—and mostly small-scale, with a mean of just under three slaves per slaveowner, about half the average in São Paulo at the time.⁴² How likely was it for a Black person to be free in this context? Which factors help explain the likelihood of freedom? To what extent was this driven by the free-wombs policy? Figure 3 suggests that while one-third of Black people were free, freedom was unequally distributed across age groups following a convex line: children and relatively mature people were more likely to be free than young adults. The comparative literature on manumission, as we shall see, suggests that as slaves became older their possibilities of emancipating themselves increased. Meanwhile, the peak at the beginning of the age distribution could suggest a large effect of the free-womb legislation, which should have reached all children under the age of 7 (i.e. born after the 1830 constitution).

⁴² There was a gap between slave-owning *labradores* (crop farmers) who had an average of 1.7 slaves and slave-owning *hacendados* (ranchers) who had an average of 3.3. Slaves made up about a fifth of the recorded agricultural workforce in the enumerators' books, including family labour. Property in enslaved people still made up 20% of asset value (including land, trees, buildings, and livestock) in 145 estates for which we have tax assessments taken at the same time as the population listings. AGN-AGA, 'Planillas estadísticas de cada propiedad', Libros 465, 276, 283. On São Paulo, see Luna and Klein, 'Slaves and masters', 564–65.

Figure 3. Freedom status and age of a sample of Black people in Uruguay, 1836 (N=7,365)

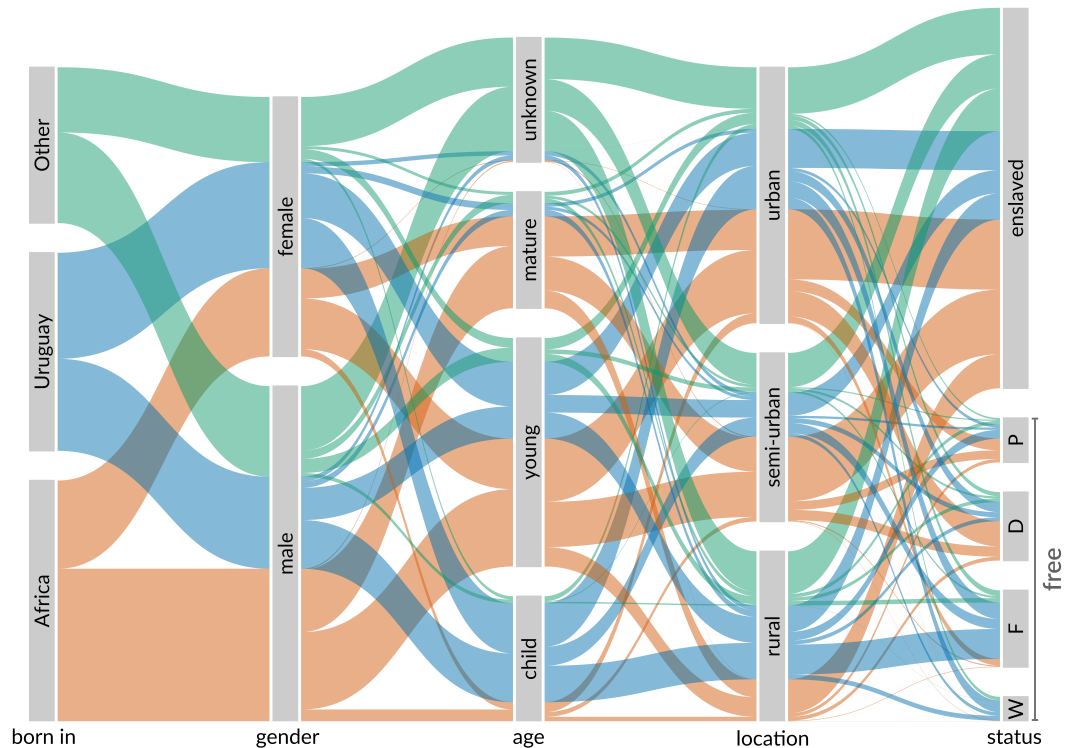


Note: only district records with full age data are used; solid line shows LOESS curve fitting; dashed line shows 95% confidence bands. For a comparison with the age structure of the non-Black population see Figure A2 in the Appendix.

Sources: manuscripts at Archivo General de la Nación (Montevideo); see Table 1 for details.

Let us look more closely at the grounds for freedom. If we focus on the sub-group of freed Black people and families for whom we have an occupational descriptor in the enumerators' books we can (in the case of adults) infer how they earned the income necessary to buy freedom or how, after becoming free, they sustained their livelihoods. In the case of children, we can measure the impact of the free-wombs legislation by looking at the status of their parents. If a free Black child's parents were also free, then they would have been free anyway without the law; if his or her parents were slaves, then the child was free because of the institutional change. Figure 4 offers a breakdown of free Black Africans and Afro-Uruguayans in the sample according to their region of birth, gender, age, and the grounds for their freedom.

Figure 4. Free wombs and other status of free and enslaved Black people in Uruguay, 1836 (N=9,349) (band width represents number of people in subgroups defined by categorical variables)



Notes: status categories are defined as follows: ‘W’ (for free wombs) refers to children born of enslaved parents but who are recorded as free because under the free-wombs institution; ‘F’ refers to family members of a household head (man or woman) who was free and had a recorded occupation; ‘D’ refers to free Black people who were dependent workers (farm labourers, foremen, etc); ‘P’ refers to free Black people who were independent producers (farmers, ranchers, etc.). Age thresholds are defined at the 33rd and 66th percentile of the age distribution: ‘child’ (13 years old or younger), ‘young’ (13 to 37 years old), ‘mature’ (>37).

Sources: see Table 1. All individual records of free Black people containing full household data are included.

These nested proportions suggest that the free-wombs law had a small direct impact on slave emancipation in early-independent Uruguay, reaching fewer than 5% of Black people (and only about 10% of free Black people). The over-representation of children in the free Black population and their consequent under-representation among slaves was not due to the universal application of the law. Indeed, over a quarter of children under 7 were officially recorded as slaves, in blatant violation of the legislation. Rather, the greater prevalence of freedom among children is due to the fact that free Black people had more children than enslaved Black people. Three-quarters of free Black children were born to free parents and thus did not owe the recognition of their freedom to the new institution. This suggests that the ability of slaves to obtain income to pay for manumission and, afterwards, to sustain a family was a crucial determinant in advancing freedom. A plurality of free adults of African descent in the sample (40%) were independent producers, almost all of them crop farmers. It would seem that access to agricultural land played a part in the advancement of freedom in postcolonial Uruguay.

I now test these insights with a probit model to estimate relative likelihoods of freedom, exploiting geographical variation across the sample. The observations are Black individuals; the dependent variable is a dummy which equals one when the person is free and zero when the person is enslaved. The independent variables are all dichotomous except for age and the geographical covariates which are continuous. A squared term for age is included to test the robustness of the

convex relationship between age and freedom. The empirical literature on slave emancipation shapes the expectations for the other main independent variables: freedom should be more prevalent among females, mixed-race individuals, creoles (i.e. those not born in Africa), and mature people (as opposed to very young adults).⁴³ Previous research on North America and the Caribbean would also suggest that freedom would be less common among Black people residing in rural settlements,⁴⁴ although as we have seen from the presence of free Black farmers in the case of Uruguay we could have reason to think otherwise. Following local historiography, we would expect Black people living further away from Brazil (one of the largest slave societies in global history and a former occupying power in Uruguay) to show a greater likelihood of being free.⁴⁵ The effect of increasing the distance to Montevideo, the largest urban settlement and presumably a source of ‘extra employment’ opportunities, would presumably be negative.⁴⁶ Also from local historiography we draw the expectation that ranching areas would be less favourable to slave emancipation, because since the colonial period slavery had been more associated with ranching than with crop farming.⁴⁷ Finally, an indicator of wheat suitability under rainfed, traditional farming conditions is included as a geographical control to reflect how favourable local temperature, radiation, soil, and moisture regimes were for growing Uruguay’s staple crop. To ease interpretation, Table 2 reports the marginal effects, which measure the change in the probability of freedom for the average observation as a result of a discrete change in binary variables and of a unit-change in the case of continuous variables. Heteroskedasticity in the data is controlled by estimating White standard errors, which are reported in parentheses. The model was tested for multicollinearity.⁴⁸ Figure 5 further facilitates interpretation by rescaling the marginal effects of predictors that are not binary by twice the standard deviation of these variables in the dataset.

⁴³ Lewis, ‘Transition’; Blackburn, ‘Introduction’; Bodenhorn, ‘Manumission’.

⁴⁴ Brana-Shute and Sparks, *Paths to Freedom*.

⁴⁵ Borucki, Chagas, and Stalla, *Esclavitud y trabajo*.

⁴⁶ Thul, ‘Traficantes’; Borucki, ‘250 años’.

⁴⁷ Gelman, *Campesinos*; Moraes, ‘Economías agrarias’.

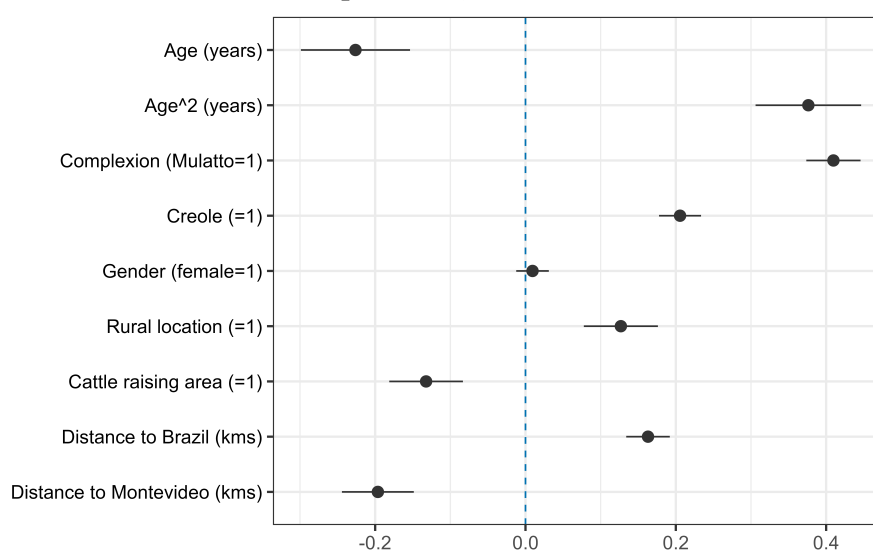
⁴⁸ None of the variables had variance inflation factors above 4.

Table 2. Regression results from probit model.

	Outcome: freedom status (0=slave, 1=free)			
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Age (years)	-0.016*** (0.001)	-0.007*** (0.001)	-0.007*** (0.001)	-0.008*** (0.002)
Age ²	0.0003*** (0.000)	0.0002*** (0.000)	0.0002*** (0.000)	0.0002*** (0.000)
Gender: Female=1		0.018 (0.013)	0.011 (0.013)	0.011 (0.013)
Complexion: Mulatto=1		0.333*** (0.019)	0.373*** (0.021)	0.442*** (0.020)
Creole: not born in Africa=1		0.224*** (0.014)	0.236*** (0.014)	0.226*** (0.015)
Rural location (=1)			0.061** (0.025)	0.146*** (0.028)
Lives in cattle raising district (=1)			-0.162*** (0.022)	-0.148*** (0.025)
<i>Geographical controls</i>	<i>No</i>	<i>No</i>	<i>No</i>	<i>Yes</i>
Wheat suitability (index, 0-100)				-0.003*** (0.001)
Distance to Montevideo (kms.)				-0.001*** (0.0001)
Distance to Brazilian border (kms.)				0.002*** (0.0001)
Observations	6,861	6,861	6,861	6,861
RMSE	0.48	0.45	0.45	0.45

Note: observations are all individuals of African descent in the dataset for whom we have full variable data. Results reported as marginal effects (the partial effects for the average observation), with robust standard errors in parentheses. ***, **, and * denote significance at the 1%, 5%, and 10% levels. Lat and long were dropped to avoid collinearity with distance to Montevideo and to the Brazilian border. Temperature and rainfall were dropped due to collinearity with wheat suitability. Sources: see Table 1.

Figure 5. Average marginal effects on the probability of freedom



Note: whiskers show 95% confidence intervals; effects for continuous variables rescaled by twice the standard deviation of the variable in the dataset (as per Gelman, 'Scaling'). Source: Table 2.

The coefficients for *Age* and *Age*² fit the inverted-U relationship between age and freedom, which is in line with the life-cycle approach to individual emancipation in the comparative literature.⁴⁹ The sign of the likelihood for the gender variable runs in favour to expectations, but its effect is not significant in any specification when controlling for other personal characteristics. The significant and positive coefficients for *Complexion* and *Creole* are also in line with expectations. Their effect was large: at the mean the likelihood of being free increased by almost 40% for people of lighter complexion (*pardos, mulatos*) and by over 20% for those born in South America compared to those born in Africa.⁵⁰ Location relative to Montevideo and Brazil was also significant and with opposite signs as expected. The result for the rural dummy will be discussed below, as it challenges conventional expectations: freedom was significantly more widespread (about 15% more likely at the mean) among Black people living in rural areas. This was not the reflection of slavery being geographically concentrated in areas near the main slave port, as shown by the coefficient for distance to Montevideo. The opposite-signed likelihoods of rural settlement and wheat suitability suggest that it was more likely to find emancipated Black people in areas of comparatively poorer soils and worse conditions for rainfed, traditional agriculture. Finally, and also as expected, people of African descent were more likely to be free in areas of smallholder farming, in contrast with districts where cattle raising was a major occupation among household heads.

IV. DISCUSSION

Freedom was not randomly distributed across the Black population of early independent Uruguay. Results from the analysis of a large sample of individual records indicate that the vast majority of free people of African descent before the abolition of slavery were free as a result of one of two labours: ‘extra’ work in additional employment and giving birth to (and caring for) children. These two forms of labour were behind the convex relationship between age and freedom: children and mature adults were more likely to be free, with teenagers and very young adults more likely to be enslaved. Of course, work and reproduction were intertwined, not least because most free children were born to free parents, who had themselves laboured for their own freedom. While the free-wombs law required that all Black children under 7 be free from slavery, in fact over 25% of them were not free. Those who were had mostly been born in free Black households. Let us see how the ‘two labours’ of people of African descent in postcolonial Uruguay can be further understood with the help of some theoretical insights and in the context of the comparative empirical literature.

Historical sociologists argue that the social dynamics of a slave regime are revealed by the possibilities of manumission it offers to different people.⁵¹ From that perspective, Uruguay shared many features with other postcolonial slave societies in the Americas. The gaps in the likelihood of selective slave emancipation were generally similar to what scholars have found in the United States and the Caribbean: higher rates of manumission for those of lighter complexion, low rates among teenagers and very young adults.⁵² From ancient to modern times, slavery always implied the stigmatization of an ethnic, religious or civilizational ‘other’ and therefore when an individual was more similar to the local population (in appearance, language, and social networks) their chances of

⁴⁹ Lewis, ‘Transition’.

⁵⁰ The category ‘*pardo*’ included people with mixed African and European ancestry as well as those with mixed Amerindian, African, and European ancestry (Thul, ‘Trabajo libre’, 38). To avoid conflating these categories, people who were registered as of Amerindian ‘nation’ were excluded from our database.

⁵¹ Patterson, *Social Death*, 209–96.

⁵² Bodenhorn, ‘Mulatto advantage’; Bodenhorn, ‘Manumission’; Lewis, ‘Transition’; Brana-Shute and Sparks, *Paths to Freedom*.

achieving freedom increased.⁵³ Slavery implied a socially pervasive ethnic hierarchy, which in postcolonial Uruguay was expressed in systematic distinctions between white and Black people, but also across people of African descent, allowing more opportunities for emancipation to South American-born people than to African-born people and to men and women of lighter complexion. Moreover, the fact that in a few cases the Uruguayan enumerators' books show former slaves becoming slaveholders is also in line with the historical sociology literature and can be taken as proof that the possibility of individual emancipation was perfectly compatible with slavery. The possibility of manumission was a necessary component of slavery to address its incentive problems.⁵⁴

Indeed, from the point of view of economic theory, manumission is a solution to the principal-agent problem inherent in slavery.⁵⁵ Slave emancipation, therefore, depends on the economic incentives of slaveowners, which as Cole and Budros showed for 19th-century Louisiana and Virginia respectively, are tied to the relative prices of slaves and commodities.⁵⁶ In Uruguay, slave-owners had good reasons to 'rent out' their slaves and let them keep part of the income because this was a relatively high wage economy, especially given the high and rising prices of export commodities (notably cattle hides and *tasajo*, i.e. beef jerky).⁵⁷ Theory further suggests that slave-owners have greater incentives to allow slaves to do extra work for wages and eventually negotiate manumission in sectors in which more skilled labour is required. While the Uruguayan data do not allow me to test these insights directly, one way of addressing the issue is to measure differences in numeracy between free and enslaved Black people. We can approximate these by analysing the prevalence of age heaping in the self-reported age data in the enumerators' books.⁵⁸ I find that numeracy rates were considerably higher for free Black people (41%) than for enslaved Black people (32%). This could be taken as indicative of higher human capital levels among those who achieved emancipation.

There is one finding that differentiates Uruguayan slave emancipation from other cases in the comparative literature and deserves further discussion. Controlling for the effects of region of age, origin, complexion, and gender, free Black people were more likely to be found in the countryside and especially in areas of small-scale crop farming. Different mechanisms behind this relationship would tell very different stories. It could be that it was more likely for Black people to be free in rural smallholder areas because market-oriented agriculture in those places offered more incentives to slave-owners to rent out their slaves, giving slaves the chance to eventually buy their freedom. If that was the case, the likelihood of freedom for a person of African descent should be greater in areas with better endowments for commercial crop agriculture. Alternatively, it could be that our cross-sectional picture depicts emancipated Black individuals and families who moved to their rural district *after* achieving their freedom. If this was the case, then given that the government's land policy made no provision for former slaves, we would expect a greater likelihood of Black freedom in rural areas which were *less* suitable for commercial agriculture, and where land was unenclosed, easier to successfully squat on, and eventually also cheaper to buy. The suitability of land for rain-fed, traditional wheat agriculture reflects local endowments and is an exogenous variable which can be a good test of this mechanism, because wheat was by far the most important cash crop.⁵⁹ Holding everything else constant, the expected probability of freedom almost twice as high in the least suitable areas compared to the most suitable (Figure 6).

⁵³ Drescher and Engerman, *World slavery*; Miller, *Problem*.

⁵⁴ Patterson, 'Manumission', 20.

⁵⁵ Findlay, 'Slavery'; Fenoaltea, 'Slavery'; Dari-Mattiacci, 'Slavery'.

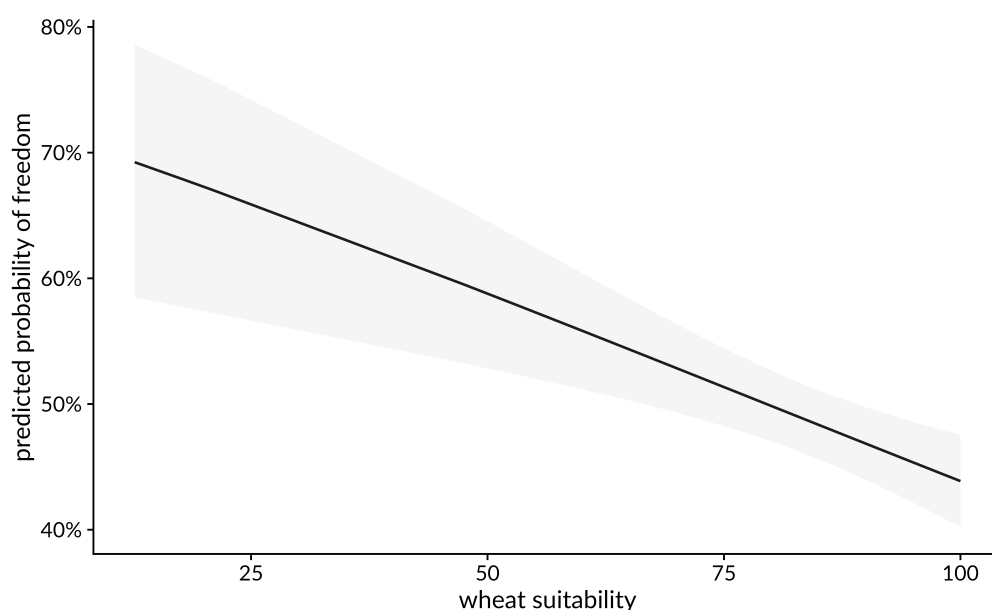
⁵⁶ Cole, 'Capitalism'; Budros, 'Social shocks'.

⁵⁷ Borucki, 'Después'; Thul, 'Trabajo libre'. On exports, see Sluyter, 'Tasajo'; Moraes and Stalla, 'Antes'.

⁵⁸ I follow the method in A'Hearn, Baten, and Crayen, 'Age heaping'.

⁵⁹ Moraes, *Pradera*.

Figure 6. Effect of wheat suitability on likelihood of freedom in rural areas (N=2,632)



Note: all other variables in the model are held at their mean value or at their reference level for dichotomous variables; shaded area shows 95% confidence bands.

Sources: probit regression from Table 2 (column 4); for dataset sources see Table 1.

Previous studies of manumission have shown that slaves themselves played a role in how they achieved freedom, beyond the economic incentives of slave-owners.⁶⁰ The Uruguayan data suggest that they also exercised their economic agency afterwards, although within constraints they did not choose. The enumerators' books reveal that former slaves re-inserted themselves into the rural economy in a variety of roles, not only as wage labourers but also as independent producers, including family-based farming and even cattle-raising employing hired labour. As Cardoso and Pérez Brignoli hypothesised for other Latin American cases, the transition out of slavery led to an expansion of peasant agriculture.⁶¹ This resonates with empirical studies in other historical contexts, such as West Africa, where former slaves also relocated to other rural areas after becoming free in order to shed the social stigma of slavery and reinsert themselves in society.⁶² It also fits with the widespread aspiration of freed people elsewhere in the Americas, who aimed for independent rural production as a way of protecting their freedom.⁶³ In Uruguay this process was entirely bottom-up: the government of the young republic had no policy towards freedpeople, and their livelihoods were forged in a formal institutional context which was at best indifferent to their fate. Uruguayan factor ratios were still defined by the abundance of cheap, uncultivated land, but the best farmland was already occupied by white creole farmers or their large cattle herds.

These results suggest that the stark inequalities of the slave regime inherited from the colonial period were carried onto the late-nineteenth century by the unequal access to land: emancipated people were more likely to eke out a living in the least fertile areas, either as squatters or land-owning peasants. Thus, slave emancipation in an institutional context without any redistributive policies resulted in an embedding of racial inequality onto *de facto* resource allocation, which would

⁶⁰ Whitman, *Price of Freedom*; Lewis, 'Transition'; Wolf, *Race and Liberty*; Bodenhorn, 'Manumission'.

⁶¹ Cardoso and Pérez-Brignoli, *Historia económica II*, 26.

⁶² Rossi, 'Migration'; Manchuelle, 'Slavery'.

⁶³ See, for Haiti, Gonzalez, *Maroon Nation*, 158-68; for Jamaica, Holt, *Problem of freedom*, 267-68; for the US, Hahn, *Nation*, 118-20; for Brazil, Chalhoub, 'Precariousness'; for Cuba, Scott, *Slave Emancipation*, 256-64.

remain presumably unaffected by the *de jure* erasing of racial hierarchies with the abolition of slavery in 1852. As historical sociologists have argued, the likelihood of and the paths to emancipation in a slave regime went on to condition the quality of freedom once it was achieved.⁶⁴

V. CONCLUSION

The end of slavery was arguably the most dramatic change in the history of Latin American inequality. After centuries of forced labour of Africans and their descendants, slavery ended during the so-called ‘lost decades’ following independence—not quite ‘lost’ time after all. Indeed, the often-criticised conflicts of those years might have been good for equality, as countries which experienced independence wars were the first to move towards abolition. This process usually began with selective, individual slave emancipation either through manumission or at birth, in an institutional context defined by free-womb laws. Any analysis of the economic and social legacies of slavery in the region must examine the specific workings of these transitions. The gradualist path chosen by Uruguayan elites (and their counterparts in other new republics) was crucial in carrying forward slavery’s legacy of inequality. Historians of Latin America have long known that free-womb policies were designed to dilute the political impact of emancipation by making it a drawn-out process. I argue that the nature of the transition also mattered for the economic distribution of resources (notably fertile land) and acted as a vessel carrying racial inequalities forged under the colonial slave regime onto the future.

I relied on Uruguayan archival sources to examine the likelihood of freedom among a large sample of individuals of African descent in the aftermath of independence. Freedom was unequally distributed among them: people born in South America rather than Africa and people of lighter complexion were systematically more likely to escape slavery. In this way, the nature of the transition reflected the ethnic hierarchy of a ranked society where social status was defined by skin tone and place of birth. The likelihood of freedom also followed a discernible, convex relationship with age: young children and older adults were more likely to escape slavery. This relative advantage children enjoyed was not, however, due to the free-womb legislation, which the data show as not universally applied. Most free Black children had been born to emancipated people, and so their freedom was the result of their parents’ labour, both in giving birth and in having earned their own freedom. While a third of people of African descent were free in postcolonial Uruguay, they mostly had to make their living in less fertile rural areas: low suitability for traditional wheat farming was a significant predictor of Black freedom.

Slave emancipation in Uruguay between the end of colonial rule (a cycle of conflicts spanning 1811–1825) and the legal abolition of slavery (1852) was primarily a bottom-up process, driven by Africans and their descendants more than by government policy. A large sample of individual listings showed that fewer than 5% of Black people had attained freedom through the free-womb policy by 1836, compared to almost 30% who were free through their own labour or that of their immediate families. Even if uneven and partial, this period of enterprising slave emancipation represented a notable step forward for equality. However, its positive effects on long-term development were diluted by the lack of any policy aimed at freed people, who were more likely to find themselves in less productive lands. If not quite ‘lost decades’, the economic history of early-independent Latin America was certainly a time of missed opportunities.⁶⁵ One of the most crucial was not harnessing the full potential of slave emancipation to reduce inequality and promote human capital accumulation—two salient problems of long-term Latin American development.

⁶⁴ Patterson, *Social Death*; Blackburn, ‘Introduction’.

⁶⁵ Bértola and Ocampo, *Economic Development*, 54.

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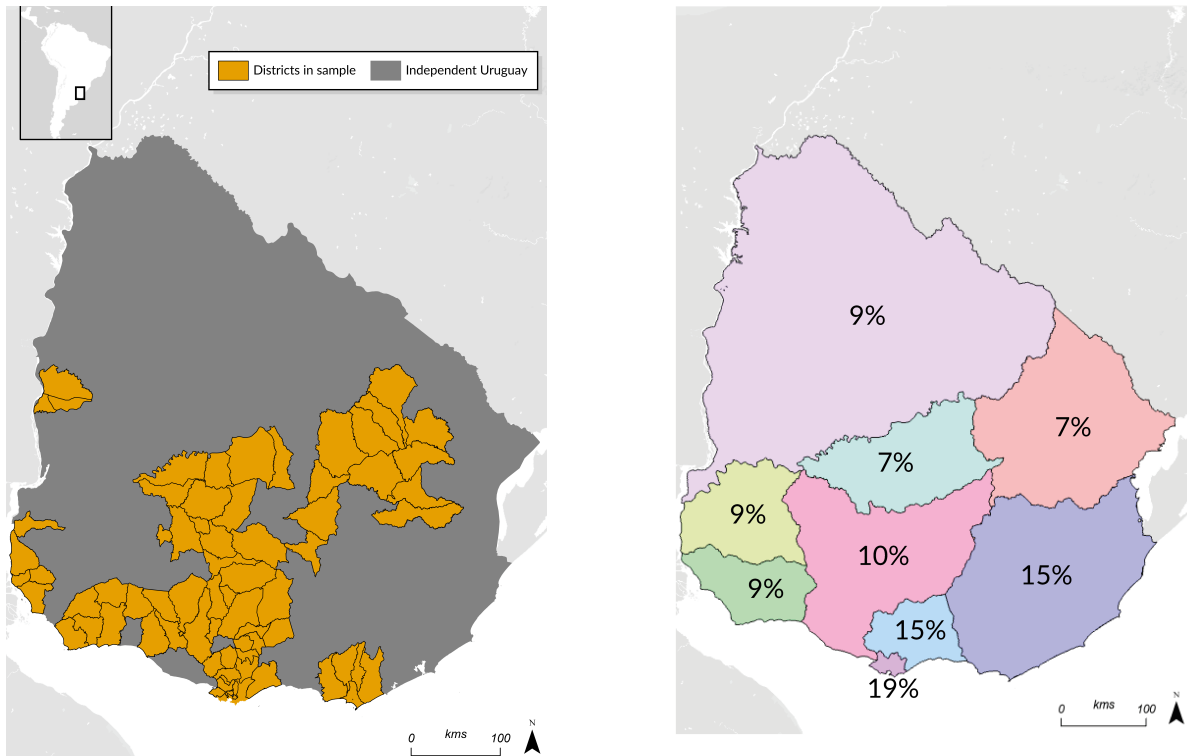
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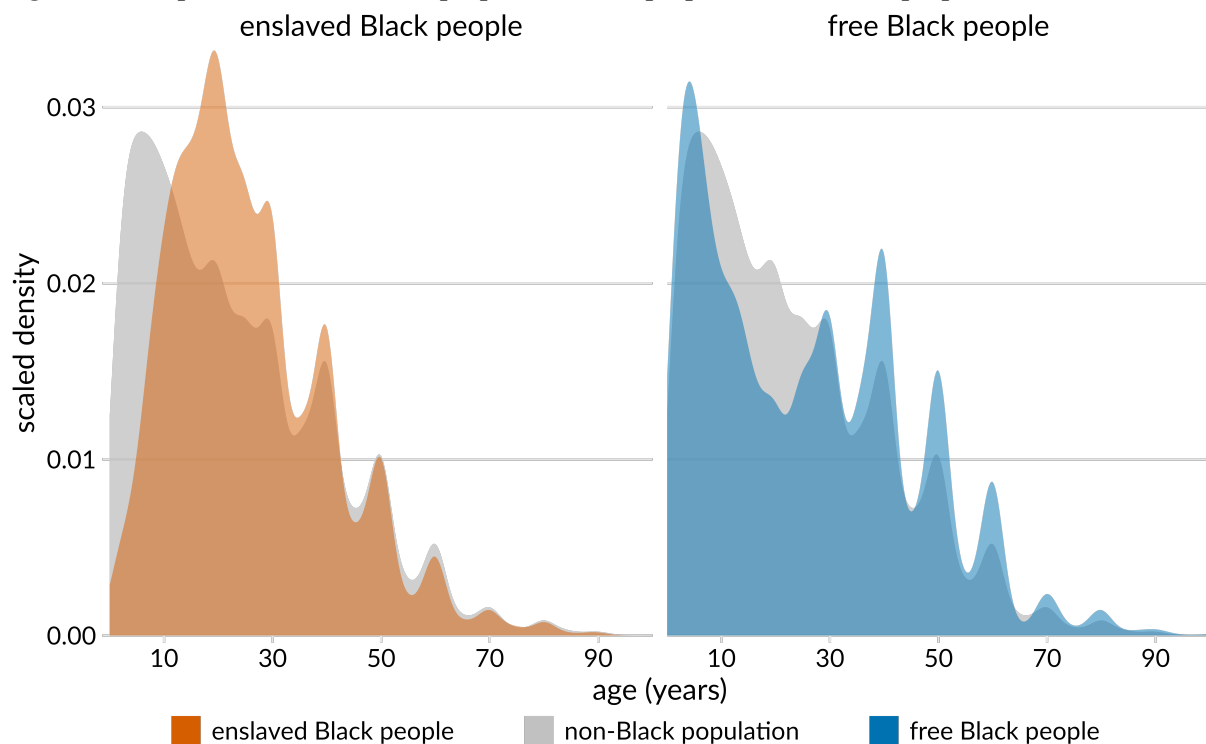
Appendix

Figure A1. Location of districts with surviving enumerators' books and approximate share of national population by province according to historical demographers, 1830s.



Sources: author's own approximate georeferencing of enumerators' books (left); Barrachini and Altezor, *Historia*, on the basis of estimates in Paris de Oddone, Faraone, and Oddone, *Cronología* (right).

Figure A2. Age profiles: enslaved Black people, free Black people, and non-Black people (N=17,010)



Note: density estimates were performed with a Gaussian kernel and a bandwidth of 2.

Sources: see Table 1 for primary sources.