

The rise and fall of the 1st Cuban Republic's racial utopia

Jorge Núñez Vega
Professor and Researcher

African cultural environments have never had the correct representation in the West. Africa, as well as its extensions, tend to be seen by Western people as areas marked by atavism; primitive and disorganized, erotic and lively, even cruel and savage. They are seen as different in every way to the rational order the Western culture supposedly founded and rules.

This rational order constituted a goal to be accomplished in the Republic which was installed in Cuba in 1902. The leaders of the 1st Republic considered it a patriotic duty to advance the country in order to enter in the community of civilized nations. Based on these terms, it was a topic of official republican-styled discussion, which maintained some persuasive capacity, at least until the decade of the 1920's. Cuba could in no case be just another one of the Antilles.

The founding Cuban nationalism which was reinforced by decades of segregating

wars that were active in the sphere of North American influences was alert toward the possibility of intervention. They maintained a relatively tense attitude with respect to the "factors" they believed could undermine from within, the civil utopia during this period of national formation. The environment of the Spanish migration; the North American settlers; the foreign merchants; the laborers imported from the "Lower Antilles" (the poor classes related to criminal behavior); and in no smaller measure, the subordinate ethnicities were listed within this set of factors¹.

Sustained by the dominant classes, nationalism was reinforced as an exclusive and vigilant practice. This produced an imaginary construct of racism, as well as authoritarian conducts similar to those of the colonial era, which though being affirmed, was hoped to be overcome in the future.

However, nationalism would accomplish its distinctions. Some publicists inverted the



Havana, 1902

terms and attempted to find a good side to its fatal flaws. For example, being inside the North American sphere of influence could have its advantages in matters of the material culture and in the continuation of a successful model. Through fear, the threat of intervention could lead the politician-commissioner networks to isolate the tendency toward corruption as well as limit violent revolts which could result from an electoral triumph. Even though the Spanish contingents were presented by public personalities such as the novelist Miguel de Carrion, as being societies separated from the national unraveling, these contingents were essential because of their wealth and their presence in commerce and services. Their children had the option of claiming Cuban citizenship

when they reached adulthood and it was to be expected that they would re-integrate with time.

The Afro-Cuban low classes constituted another problem for white nationalism. They were seen as having a propensity toward vice and criminal behavior. Before the struggle against the Colored Independents, public opinion about Afro-Cubans appeared to be divided. The philosopher Enrique Jose Varona belonged to a group of publicists named "moralists" which defended the idea that the differences between blacks and whites were not biological, but cultural. Racial cohabitation allowed "inferior races" to evolve, and it made them equal to the "superior races." The difference could be diminished however, through a process called

acculturation. The symbolic violence in this case was considered to be a civic duty. Jose Montalvo, who introduced Cesar Lombroso's criminology in Cuba, founded a second trend which doubted the success of this purpose. The "physiologists" who followed his point of view postulated the idea that racial cohabitation was degenerating. All of the racism of the XIX century and the beginning of the XX century was expressed in them, from the philosopher Arthur Gobineau to the psychologist and sociologist Gustave LeBon².

The ethnic barriers, which were unable to be saved as a result of the solid prejudices which sustained it, became deeper even after the so called War of Races of 1912. This was a violent reaction against the uprising of the Colored Independents led by Evaristo Estenoz and Pedro Ivonet which eventually ended in an operation of ethnic cleansing that presented itself as patriotic salvation. This event constituted one of the most important fractures of national formation: a clear limit to the political association and mobilization of an important sector of citizenship marked by skin color.

The non-casual circumstance that the Guerra de Razas ("War of Races") occurred at the beginning of the most thriving decade of the 1st Republic prolonged the utopia of the Antilles of "white civilization" for a while. As noted by the historian Ramiro Guerra, who would one day be able to sit down and negotiate with his equals of the world.³ Meanwhile, before that time arrived in Havana, the jewelry shined in the opera nights; the clandestine opium smokers gave a delicious decadent aroma to the Havana environment; the high fashion stores were commonplace; magazines, such as *Cuba Contemporánea y Social*, which sold an image of a cultured and glamorous society, were printed. A Slave Trade of White Women was

even initiated with European prostitutes to satisfy the whims of the noteworthy men who were tired after their legislative tasks, because a first class republic required the availability of French whores. Almost in the same sense, the conservative legislator Colonel Cosme de la Torriente proposed the opening of an Immigration Consulate in Paris in 1918 in order to secure white workers and to block the entry of Jamaican and Haitian temporary workers⁴.

The white hope appeared to be attainable when the European War was declared in 1914 and the price of sugar soared. The Turkish city of Gallipoli was far enough in distance from Havana: the roars of the struggle became rumors that spread in the afternoon streets of The Louvre. And the number of victims reported by the telegraph offices on a daily basis barely surpassed a simple diminished number. The important numbers, the only important ones at the time, were those of the sugar prices in the world market. It reached as high as 454.4 million dollars for a production of little more than four million tons in 1919.

In the imaginary white island "blacks" only served the purpose of eating mangos in artist Guiral's paintings and kidnap police officer's daughters in film maker Diaz Quesada's movies. And even then, fear persisted. A quick review of the newspapers of the time would show that any disturbance set off by Afro-Cubans, (such as a clash between police and a Carabali band in Santiago de Cuba, or a gathering of ex Independents of Color, later named "Amigos del Pueblo" [Friends of the People] which ended in a raid), would be quickly reproduced, labeled "racist outburst" and treated with the greatest sensationalism. Likewise, events such as the inauguration of the Athena Club (9/21/1917) were taken by the newspaper *La*

Discusión (The Discussion) as the fulfilment of a “desire to improve” by a part of an “evolved sector of the colored classes.”

Things as they were, the day of negotiating with the concert of civilized nations arrived with the peace of 1919. And it was a disaster. In Versailles, the lawyer Sánchez de Bustamante demanded securities for the sale of sugar production and returned to Havana empty-handed⁵. The Dance of the Millions was left without music in 1920 and a civil society formed by middle and professional classes which had grown with the exportation boom, began to seek alternatives. The intellectuals ended up abandoning the title of ruling elite and assumed more concrete obligations with the society. The nationalist scheme went into crisis and the civil society faced the political world, which was judged as corrupt especially since 1923. The idea was that things could not go well if the citizens did not accept their role of active supervisors of the country’s administration. And no citizen of the State could be excluded, regardless of his color, because it was precisely about broadening the political boundaries.

Some change in sensitivity can be observed in writers during this time, such as the ethnologist Fernando Ortiz, whose curiosity was geared toward a restoring common sense. The notion of a national identity was projected as broader and more numerous and the idea of folklore itself was revised and documented in publications such as the *Folklore Archives*. The sunken and silenced Afro-Cuban world, which until then represented a bad area dominated by the underworld, began to be of interest to elite institutions such as the Sociedad Económica de Amigos del País (Friends of the Country’s Economic Society). To criminologists such as Matías Duque, Israel Castellanos and the

foremost Fernando Ortiz, these areas were experimental camps as well as criminal vigilance and prevention camps to obtain theories about the criminal man. However, the positive mutation of Ortiz (opening and flexibility which give value to his latter work), constituted a minimal change. The multicultural Republic remained even more inaccessible than the white nation’s utopia.

What’s interesting is how the racist prejudices were reproduced and how they were adapted to the new ideological conditions. The groups of writers and artists who imposed themselves as leaders of the 1920’s, outlined the attack of the oligarchic order’s moral values. It should’ve been a period of intense cultural changes. Intellectual alliances substituted the isolation and academicism that were predominant in previous decades. The bohemian mindset penetrated the institutional and publication spheres, thereby initiating the rupture with old forms of cultural production.

In this aspect, the process wasn’t different than that of the rest of Europe and Latin America. But there is a difference which immediately comes to light. One of the most interesting processes of the history of European vanguard aesthetic movements was its proximity to African art and literature. The new paradigm took on “the black” as resource for renovation and scandal. This processing of “the black” could have been initiated in the calling of Tristan Tzara’s Dada insurrection (1916), and could have ended with Blaise Cendrars’ *Anthologie nègre*, in 1947⁶. During the same period of time, Afro things were kept as a basic and denied part of national Cuban culture. The “black world” in Cuba was near but invisible, whereas Europe appreciated it from a distance and in different ways.

In 1927, the Havana printing company

Minerva published *The Biology of Democracy*, an essay penned by the essayist Alberto Lamar Schweyer. "The Biology" was a book made to update the old prejudices against inter-ethnic cohabitation. Its central theme is the racial determination of political practices. A convincing and sustainable democracy in an environment marked by different races was unthinkable for Lamar Schweyer. Likewise, he stated that a context of "atavistic" individuals, heirs to the survival struggle of their primitive ancestors, could not be constituted into modern citizenship. He maintained that the modern manifestations of the survival struggle in Latin America were manifested in the regional leadership and the accompanying political instability. In his opinion, the republics perpetuated the atavisms of the colonial societies.

The solution to the political and social underdevelopment was supposed to count on those elements. From among all of the leaders, there should have been one who would take care of the concerns that were of national risk. An inflexible but conscientious character who Lamar modeled as the "necessary gendarme" (or necessary vigilant) was invented by the Venezuelan Laureano Vallenilla Lanz. But Lamar Schweyer was worried about the issue of arbitrariness. His political engineering rescued the notion of the intellectual elite, well known by the circles in which he moved, and he established that the enforcing powers could remain under control by reducing the electoral census until making it coincide with this elite group. The intellectuals would represent the state justice and the president would only be the executive branch. The dictator would only be the guardian of an intellectual breed. In his perception, a neo-aristocracy would acquire the rights of monitoring the politi-

cal system.

The Biology of Democracy is a mediocre book, full of racial prejudices, abrupt reasoning, inconsequence, arrogance and ignorance. It is a cocktail of influences that was culturally indigested and poorly conceived by its author. I would like to analyze its most interesting phase, the book's launching, which would reveal interesting details about the culture of the intellectual elites. But I will only point out that all of its critics (except for one, sociologist Roberto Agramonte), attacked the political message of the book (the construction of a dictatorship), eluding Biology's profound racial content. One explanation of this strategy of the criticism is that Lamar Schweyer was proposing something that president Gerardo Machado intended to put to practice with the moratorium of powers, cooperation and the fear of State. But another explanation explores the idea that racism impregnated the emerging bohemian culture, sometimes subtly and other times openly⁷. And it's grievous that his critics did not comment on this aspect.

As reported by a commission of experts, this movement toward radicalization ended with the Revolution of 1933: a blow against the arbitration and corruption of patriots who became aristocrats as well as a blow against Washington's interference with internal Cuban issues⁸. A manifestation of the republican nationalism's maturity did not translate into a bettering of the inter-ethnic circles. During the revolution, chronicler Gonzalo de Quesada y Miranda recorded secret society ABC (whose ideologists were Jorge Mañach and Francisco Ichaso). They had broadcasted a message which urged: "If you have left over food, give it to a dog, but don't give it to a black person!" ABC decreed this attack of the Afro-Cuban population

based on their belief that this sector remained loyal to Machado. The issue was, Quesada y Miranda explains, that the Afro-Cuban aspirations were not clearly represented in the goals of the revolutionary groups⁹.

Either way, the cultural radicalization of the second half of the 1920's advanced the change in sensitivity which had previously been pointed out in intellectual discourse. *Revista de Avance* (Advancement Magazine) became interested in "black art"; Nicolás Guillén's poetry began to circulate and Alejo Carpentier wrote *Écue-Yamba-Ó*¹⁰. On its end, anthropology stopped looking into degenerates and criminal elements in the sub-

urbs. For the first time the understanding between Afro-Cuban cultures would become a possible means of overcoming the social fracture bequeathed by slavery and of restoring the idea of citizenship.

These variations did not suspend Cuban racism, but they signified a change in the environment regarding the above which could be called healthy. In the future, the old and established racial utopia would have to be reformulated in more complex and subtle terms by the cultural discourse opposed to equality.

NOTES AND BIBLIOGRAPHY

- 1- Miguel de Carrión (1921). El desenvolvimiento social de Cuba en los últimos veinte años. En *Cuba Contemporánea*, La Habana. Año IX, tomo XXVII, número 105, p. 7.
- 2- Pruna P. y A. García González (1989). *Darwinismo y sociedad en Cuba*. Ediciones Siglo XIX. Madrid. CSIC, 1989, p. 127.
- 3- Guerra y Sánchez R (1927). *Azúcar y población en las Antillas*. Cultural, S.A. La Habana.
- 4- The office did not work: those who knew the most about overpricing wanted to pay the least amount possible (De la Torriente, C. *Inmigraciones peligrosas*. Address in the Senate on July 30, 1917. The Project became a law on August 3, 1917).
- 5- A review of Sánchez de Bustamante's measure can be found in: Ortiz, Fernando (1920). *Cuba en la Paz de Versailles* (Discurso pronunciado en la Cámara de Representantes en la sesión del 4 de febrero de 1920. Imprenta La Universal, La Habana).
- 6- Shelton, Marie-Denise (1984). *Le non noir dans la littérature dadaïste et surréaliste*. En *The French Review*, Vol. 56, N° 3, pp. 320-328.

- 7- The ideas of democratic fracture and dictatorship fixed their actions quietly after Machado. The social biology influence which arrived through authorities recognized by the intellectuals of the Retail Group, such as Jose Ingenieros, remained intact for at least two more years.
- 8- Comisión de Asuntos Cubanos (1935). *Problemas de la nueva Cuba* (Informe de la Comisión de Asuntos Cubanos, New York, Foreign Policy Ass).
- 9- Quesada y Miranda, Gonzalo (1938). *¡En Cuba Libre! Historia documentada y anecdótica del Machadato*. Seoane, Fernández y Cía. La Habana.
- 10- Masiello, F. *Rethinking* (1993). *Neocolonial Esthetics: Literatura, Politics, and intellectual Community in Cuba's Revista de Avance*. En *Latin America Research Review*, Vol. 28, University of New Mexico.