

# Those Who Ideated Half of Cuba

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This is a preliminary look at a subject I consider essential to the present and future of Cuba: the construction of the Cuban nation, which is the object of a great deal of controversy. I am on the side of those who believe that Cuba is an inchoate nation, not in the way relativists see it. They take refuge in the anti-historical concept that nations are constantly in a process of construction, and think this despite the evidence that we are on the brink of a disaster caused by the revolution's old, defining model based on the theoretical and real repression of many elements of our cultural plurality. I am coming from the other side of this question, in my belief that without the edifying *other* there could be no nation. The only thing possible would be an anti-national State.

Furthermore, I am concerned with the nation of Cuba in its totality. Not the black nation or the white nation, but rather the very process of rich, pluralistic confusion that through culture was becoming our country, and was interrupted by the Cuban revolution: a countercultural revolution.

The idea behind this article came from a television program that caused quite a ruckus

because it had or has to do with a project titled "University for All," which in my example takes on the task of teaching history, and history, of course, is fundamental to nation building.

The teaching of history in Cuba is pretty bad. Even if there are some more contemporary historians authorized to more correctly re-situate its chronological facts, the truth is that written history does not make it into the educational system. It remains within the confines of certain erudite circles, academic circles, and is of interest to those who have always loved history, and try to go a bit beyond what the media shows. The separate nature of these interests causes me to reflect about history itself. As far as I know, there is no conceptually real academic space for Cuban history. History in Cuba still follows the norms of what the French school of history once called a fact-driven history, with an emphasis on facts only. The theoretical underpinnings of this view of history are as old as history itself, and are based on the political view that this ill-named social science governs everything in life. Extracting lessons

from history is an old pedagogical pretension with which history itself has never complied.

Nations do not learn from facts, although there is no empirical evidence to support this contention. They learn from errors or from the consequences of their errors, and only when they have a critical view of themselves, which is not really the case with those nations that use history to teach people how to act. Behavior is precisely what different people learn, not because they reproduce the facts taught them, but because they reproduce the exemplary behavior that a history of facts attempts to inculcate. Fact-driven history is just that: a description of the facts and achievements of heroes that are manipulated according to the interests of their specific events, their unrepeatable circumstances, and the conditions that make possible their behavior.

At its core, the issue is this: it is impossible for millions of people to learn all the facts of their country's past. These facts are also subject to changes according to those who reveal new archival discoveries, new interpretations of certain facts, or repression at the hands of the secret police or State of those whose interests they would prefer to keep hidden—which goes back to politics. It is also unlikely that those millions of people want to know anything about the past. This can be explained by one thing: people do not live historically.

The clear result of this is that this type of history has little impact. It is of interest to armies, certain elites, and politicians who attempt to justify their domination by administering the past. Since it is difficult to know everything that went on before the present moment, what results is a sort of political subjugation of living generations by those clever enough to exploit the events of generations dead—and we all just seem to go on in our ignorance. This was learned by countries

that today boast the most serious scholars of history, like France, with its magnificent academies of social history, and of the history of mentalities; or Great Britain, with its excellent school of social and economic history, and these are just two examples.

What is happening on a grand scale is that certain conceptions are being aggressively propagated via a fact-driven style of teaching history. People can never really know all the facts in a chronologically structured chain; they can never know who all the people involved in an event were; or familiarize themselves with the names of all the battles, or the dates of all events, or the topography of extremely diverse places. Yet, they would come to culturally assume that our history and historical, social and cultural referents followed one direction or another. This even determines what possible events can or cannot be admitted to 'history,' which can be explained by something modern teaching knows all too well: knowledge does not depend as much on information as it does on the teaching of it. Learning to learn can come to be more important than learning what generations have learned. This explains why conceptual and values literacy is more important than learning to read, a point at which most of us Cubans have become stuck.

This is exactly what alarmed me about that history course on the "University for All" program. What was or is the title of that course? Nothing less than "Those who Ideated Cuba," which was the source for this article's title, and is my attempt to try to correct the idea of fact-driven history.

"Those who Ideated Half of Cuba" is my attempt at a conceptual, cultural, and historical level to contribute to a rewriting of our history via other frameworks containing many more categories than those taught me

more than twenty years ago. These categories still function in the Cuban school of historical thought, unless one considers a few attempts at social history, family histories, or local history. When I got the idea of writing this article, I thought I'd use the easiest approach: compare traditional paradigms of Cuban history to those that were not taught, that is, flesh out the canon with the names and figures who might have some prestige in the annals of black history in Cuba, and situate them next to our history's illustrious and controversial names. For example, putting Martín Morúa Delgado next to Alberto Lamar Schweyer, Gustavo Urrutia next to Antonio Sánchez Bustamante, Alberto Arredondo next to Enrique José Varona, and Juan René Betancourt next to Manuel Márquez Sterling—having them all dialogue with each other, comparatively and contrastively.

Yet, this short cut, like all easy short cuts, could be an intellectual trap. The basic issue is not the incomplete canon, but rather belonging to the canon. That short cut could have led me to the same limited thinking I supposedly want to question, to legitimate the idea behind the TV program: that Cuba was ideated, well ideated through the ideas of illustrious men, all white, of course. The most interesting thing this program said about black Cubans was to say that Juan Gualberto Gómez was always on the side of José Martí, or that Antonio Maceo was a man of as much force in his arm as in his mind.

The challenge is conceptual, and has to do with questioning the paradigms and attempting to show their limitations in their own historical and cultural context. Only after we've done this will the proper contrastive approach be relevant, in a broad sense. We must use a different approach than that used on the program, or from the method currently

in vogue, which portrays history as having started with the first cry of independence, or the preceding conspiracies.

A focus on any history of ideas, which is what is involved when one is talking about ideating a nation, begins with the very questions that are asked, with regards to what a nation is, or about when it is possible to talk about its existence, or also about how the nations of a particular period came to be. For example, the traditional way of teaching history traces how States are constituted. If a nation comes into being as a result of a political proclamation of independence, then what is traced is the historical process that led to that independence, which subordinates anything else about the political process. The first protest against this view came from German Romanticism, which conceived the nation as something a bit more intangible, such as the cultural spirit of a people through a vehicle like language. This protest, while limited and dangerous, because spirit and language unite with the State, was fertile because it delegitimated the annexation of territories and cultures by certain triumphant States. After all was said and done, what was left was the prestige of modern imperialism and something even more important: nations achieved coherence not from political constitutions but from when their constituents came together as civic-cultural units.

This fact has stunned most political and globalization theorists in their attempts to understand the disintegration of many nations considered to be solid, and of others that were considered a done deal because they had achieved their condition as States. East Germany is a good example of a 'false' nation within a State that was very artificially real. On the other side, we have historical India,

which included present-day Pakistan, and is an example of a State being discontinued due to cultural discontinuity. There are abundant examples of this today.

What I am interested in revealing through this analysis is that one must always delve into history and the relevance of paradigms before trying to approach fact-driven history. The still complex nature of the result produced by studies of raciality in Cuba occurs because of an assumed inability to question the great cultural referents through which we have all read about our historical and cultural processes. Can we really understand the nation via José Antonio Saco's thought? I don't think so. By now, the question seems rhetorical, yet if we agree that the answer is 'no,' then what we should do is continually question all the assumed, established facts about the Cuban nation and its culture.

I am going to use a number of these structuring assumptions that will allow me to present a more developed part of my investigation as my point of departure. I will offer new interpretations of our understanding of why, until now, all thinking about the nation has been directed at only half of Cuba's population.

After questioning the assumed nation imagined by Saco, one must consider the essentials of the Saco project, as one of my college professors used to say. Thus, the second question should be whether or not the underpinnings of Cuban culture match up to the Cuban nation we have. In other words, does the material match the mold?

The third question would be about what have been and still are the true demographic dimensions of the black presence in Cuban history. This question is of utmost importance because it deals with an idea I have already addressed elsewhere: for historical reasons,

blacks come to 'belong' to and on the island and take the place of a more or less extinct indigenous population during colonial times. Their impact on the socialization of Cuban culture is essential to all our history.

A fourth question would involve asking what the sociological meaning of raciality is, regarding the socialization of culture, as well as what its importance to family life is, as well as to the circulation of ideas, and other spheres of daily life.

A fifth question would be about what was the importance and impact of blacks on the Cuban economy, seen in terms of class, prevalence or the most dynamic economic activities, or its relation to the essential role the submerged economy has had on economic history. An econometric rewriting of Cuba would reveal new clues to help us calibrate the role of blacks in the country's economic life.

A seventh question would be to ask what we should understand about Cuba's sociologically predominant religious culture. Is the role of dominant religions tied to the place of this predominant religiosity?

The seventh question would concern ideological culture. Is Cuba reflected in the monism of its hegemonic ideology, or is it better explained by a polytheism of values, the pragmatism that results from this, and a flexible social life? What has been the role of religions of African origin in this ideological flexibility?

The eighth has to do with whether or not there is any structural relationship between the elevated realm of ideas and the social context in which they are circulated. What effect has the division between the elite's imaginings and the social imaginary had?

The ninth question would be to question the direct relationship, historically speaking, between social marginalization in Cuba and

racialized sectors that are in no way a minority population.

The tenth question would be about why politics refuses to reflect the sociological representation of the cultural majority, and attempts to represent the social majority instead. This is a very important question for understanding the limitations of our inchoate national project. We would do well to see that putting forth racial demands has always been seen as divisive for the nation, despite the fact that class struggle never has. Couldn't we say that class struggle affects and affected our national unity? At the very least, we should understand why political parties along social class lines were fomented, but parties along cultural class lines were not. Workers' parties, yes. Racial parties, no.

The eleventh question would be about whether or not a nineteenth-century conception of freedom and emancipation matches up to that of cultural self-emancipation. Is liberty synonymous with liberation?

The twelfth and final question is whether or not it was actually possible to 'think' or imagine the Cuban nation in the nineteenth century. Imagining it required an ability to abandon a historical-political-economic narrative in favor of an anthropological-cultural-linguistic one for use as the foundation for the cultural and sociological nation that was

rehearsed in the early twentieth century, but that never really permeated the Cuba that was civically and politically abruptly interrupted in 1959.

Let me finish with my observations about the limitations of the Saco project that continue to this day, and block the emergence of other thoughts about the Cuban nation.

The first volume of a romantically titled compilation, *La condición humana en el pensamiento cubano del siglo XX* [The Human Condition is Twentieth-Century Cuban Thought] (Colectivo de autores. Primer Tercio del Siglo, Tomo I, Editorial de Ciencias Sociales, La Habana, Cuba, 2010), includes 20 thinkers from the first half of the twentieth century. There is only one black man among them: Juan Gualberto Gómez, someone who precisely kept his distance from racialized visions of the Cuban national project. One might think that subsequent volumes corrected this error because to talk of humanistic thought in Cuba without mentioning black authors and thinkers can only be explained in a context of that nineteenth-century view that did not see black people as reaching the heights of thought. Let us attribute this to prejudice. We can all conclude that if there is humanistic thought in Cuba, it is essentially that of black Cuban men and women who ideated Cuba as a whole.



*Second Race and Cubanness Forum. Rap concert by rapper Nating. (November, 2011)*