

The Black Press in Cuba and its Discourse of Modernity

Lucas Garve
Foundation for Freedom of Expression
 Havana, Cuba

Following modernity's footsteps

The most concrete evidence of modernity in Spain and Spanish America can be found in artistic and literary print materials. Modernism was a purely Hispanic-American expressive movement that shook the earlier underpinnings and canons of the Fine Arts, particularly in literature—both prose and poetry. It was an artistic movement characterized by the way it updated the creative process to serve as witness to the will of independent creation, and the configuration of a refined world where perceptions and sensations—translated as literary images—made up a transcending view of an artistic referent that in literature was seen in linguistic innovations, most particularly rhythmic ones. This was achieved through an artistic sensibility and openness to diverse cultures, particularly those that became seen as exotic, due to their cultural and geographic distance.

An excessive appreciation of the influence of Modernism on the Hispanic-American cultural scene brought about as a consequence, perhaps, disdain for the most important thing about modernity: its effect on the population. Thus, we can generally observe that when modernity is considered in the Ibero-American and particularly Cuban context, scholars

analyze, conclude and design patterns via Modernism in literature, and neglect the importance of and degree to which it influenced the social transformations modernity brought about in Hispanic America.

For Cuba, of course, it is important to distinguish the fields on which modernity had an impact, and the methods by which it was taken to different population groups. This is because Cuba is usually included in the natural geographic context of what were actually continental events, and thus experienced things a little differently, because it was an island. Modernity presents itself as a grouping of socio-cultural and politico-economic relations resulting from and established in a European context, and conditioned by capitalism's development needs and the rise of liberalism.

A view of Cuba during its transition to modernity

In 1878, the Spanish government applied Provincial and Municipal laws that allowed: «All Spaniards the right to associate for the purposes of human life.» It was first applied in a temporary manner, but later became permanent. So, the year 1878 and beyond saw the creation of societies, corporations and interest groups of all sorts in urban centers. There

were three noteworthy factors that sped up this creation of a civil society: the influence of a large number of immigrants who arrived in Cuba from the *madre patria* (Spain), the abolition of slavery (1880), which released a considerable number of people into the market's workforce, and the possibility of freely associating or forming interest groups.

The number of black and *mestizo* workers and artisans increased in cities, particularly port cities, because many former slaves kept on residing in urban centers and worked in the service sector—as tailors, bricklayers, shoemakers, leather workers, carpenters, seamstresses, servants, washerwomen and hair stylists. Yet, there were also many mulatto teachers and midwives. There were many black and *mestizo* men and women among the ranks of cigar workers. In 1899, 34.7% of skilled cigar makers were black and *mestizo*. Noteworthy, too, was the admission of blacks and *mestizos* to all levels of schooling, according to a November 20, 1878 flyer, which addresses the need for free education, and serves as an example of the changes that took place in Cuba that affected blacks and *mestizos*.

The importance of freedom of association laws and freedom of the press for black Cubans

After the abolition of slavery, the three, aforementioned laws were the most important for black Cubans. The Printing Law, in particular, allowed them to strongly develop their visibility, thanks to support that modernity offered: the newspaper.

In 1886, the Central Directory of the Colored Race was created. It continued to function till 1894 and eventually consisted of 143 black and *mestizo* societies. In 1879, under influence from the Directory itself, the first and best journalistic publications immediately made their appearance. Some reflected interests in different trends in black and *mestizo* communities that were committed to the colonial government's 'client-oriented,' integrationist politics. Others defended the ideas of separatist groups, a tendency that wanted to unite all black Cubans and promote Enlightenment, Education, morality and social fraternity as pillars for upward mobility and social acknowledgment. (See # 1)

1

Newspaper	Director	Tendency
El Ciudadano	Manuel G. Alburquerque	conservative-integrationist
El Hijo del Pueblo		conservative-integrationist
La Unión	Casimiro Bernabeu	Conservative
El Heraldo	Rodolfo Hernández de Trava	Conservative
La Lealtad		Conservative
La Fraternidad	Juan G. Gómez	separatist and liberal
El Pueblo	Martín Morúa Delgado	separatist and liberal
La Armonía	Rafael Serra Montalvo	separatist and liberal
La Igualdad	Juan G. Gómez	separatist and liberal
<i>La Nueva Era</i>	Martín Morúa Delgado	Autonomist
<i>El Nuevo Criollo</i>	Rafael Serra	separatist liberal

Modernity in the black press's black discourse

The discourse in these newspapers, and in others produced by old *cabildo* groups and societies, was characterized by a goal involving the upward mobility and social acknowledgment of black Cubans, especially those in the middle class. They communicated the idea of progress and the possibility of upward social mobility by means of education and the adoption of the norms and conduct promoted by modernity's ideals.

Feminine discourse at this time is noteworthy in these black and *mestizo* publications because they were politically radical regarding giving women visibility in public spaces, and extended their interests to union and other social issues beyond their earlier focus, e.g., abolitionism. These publications functioned as a form of privileged support for getting to the black masses the arguments that would serve to help defend their rights and options for economic and social betterment. They communicated their own discourse about progress as the engine of modernity, and about how to work to join and invest their interests in it. Different perspectives often created more division than union, but a defense of black and *mestizo* interests generally prevailed.

Besides education, this press emphasized the family, because of its natural responsibility for preparing new generations for «taking advantage of all the possibilities a cultured society offers.» Thus, marriage as a legal means for safeguarding family patrimony and its accumulated capital was highly valued. A relationship with Africa and their ancestors did not receive attention from the majority of these publications. On the contrary, they rejected the folkloric and picturesque view of blacks in order to promote a distancing of roots they did not consider to be theirs, but

rather their parents' and grandparents,' because by now they thought themselves to be Cubans.

Participation of black women in the creation of a discourse for social integration

The journal *Minerva*, while not the only one, was responsible for disseminating a vindicating discourse about black women. Their education also included notions of progress. One of many reasons was because on them fell the responsibility of educating their children, and because education was the road towards receiving the dual recognition they deserved as women and blacks. From her pages in *Minerva* and other periodical publications, Úrsula Coimbra de Valverde defended those interests right into the beginning of the twentieth century. «Women are not inferior to men in Cuba or any other country, not even when they have lacked the weapons with which to enter the fray; instead, it is men who have been and always are selfish, because they believe they own us, and are superior to us in intelligence and condition... Women have shown unquestionable evidence of their worth.»

Others who joined Coimbra de Valverde in *Minerva* are Salie Derosme, Carmelina Saracent and Cristina Ayala. There were others who collaborated, too, among them América Font, María Ángela Storini, África Céspedes, Pastora Ramos, Catalina Medina, Natividad González, Felipa Basilio, Etelvina Zayas, and other black and *mestizo* women. During a brief period, November 1888 to July 1889, they showed their intellectual mettle and spirit for the vindication of their gender and racial rights. *Minerva* was distributed in many of Cuba's cities, as well as in New York and Key West.

Our evaluation of the totality of the black press from the end of the nineteenth century and well into the twentieth allows us to confirm the impact of this integrative, modernist discourse, even though there were different versions of it, as differences between publications reveal. It is unfortunate that Cuba wastes so much time and effort, and so many resources to use the media to disseminate topics that are so ephemeral, particularly when historical memory continues to ignore the existence of a press whose vocation was to defend the interests of blacks and *mestizos*, and included a well-articulated, feminist discourse. This very accomplishment by so discriminated, repudiated and relegated a group could have major educational value for those anxious to improve their social horizons.

Listing of periodical publications (place and date of establishment) about black and mestizo interests:

El Abolicionista (Madrid, 1872)
El Adelanto (Pinar del Río, 1887)
La Africana (Havana, 1885)
El Africano (Havana, 1887)
El Aprendiz (Sagua la Grande, 1899)
El Artesano (Guanabacoa, 1889)

La Aurora (Sancti Spiritus, 1887)
El Carabali (Placetas, 1888)
Caridad (Cienfuegos, 1886)
El Centro de Recreo (Remedios, 1879)
El Ciudadano (Havana, 1874)
El Damuji (Cienfuegos, 1868)
La Democracia (Puerto Príncipe, 1890)
La Democracia (Santiago de Cuba, 1893)
El Despertador (La Habana, 1893)
El Ejemplo (Cienfuegos, 1884)
El Emisario (Sagua La Grande, 1886)
El Emisario popular (Santiago de Cuba, 1885)
La Esperanza (Puerto Príncipe, 1883)
La Esperanza (Santa Clara, 1881)
La Fraternidad (Caibarién, 1886)
La Fraternidad (Havana, 1879)
La Fraternidad (Havana, 1890)
La Fraternidad (Puerto Príncipe, 1883)
El Hijo del Pueblo (Cienfuegos, 1886)
El látigo (Cienfuegos, 1885)
La Luz (Matanzas, 1879)
El Mensajero (Sagua la Grande, 1887)
Minerva (Havana, 1888)
La Amistad (Cienfuegos, 1883)
La Armonía (Sancti Spiritus, 1882)
El Artesano (Manzanillo, 1882)
El Circulo de Obreros (Santa Clara, 1883)
El Fraternal (Havana, 1887)