

Independent Party of Color. A Debt with Truth and History

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The manner in which the commemoration of the hundredth anniversary of the *Independent Party of Color's* (PIC) armed protest and subsequent massacre (1908-1912) has been handled in Cuba eloquently reflects how the total attitude of disdain and invisibilization to which Cuba's African descendants have been subjected all through our history is sustained.

The Cuban authorities and their academic and intellectual spokespeople have missed a marvelous opportunity to give this significant historical process and event its just due and, once and for all, finally acknowledge the participants as heroes and martyrs of the struggle for a social equality that has for so long been dreamt and sung about—but has not yet reached our country. The debates about 1912 have been even more eloquent. General President José Miguel Gómez is no longer called “Tiburón” [Shark], and there have even

been attempts to examine the supposedly heroic past of the assassins. Officialdom has not examined the antecedents, historical and social background of the PIC, an organization whose members were not simply unhappy and relegated blacks. As we now know, the continent is full of them, and there were no other parties like it. With the PIC, those who had created this country's wealth and made a capital contribution to its national culture, who contributed most to our independence, who were always exploited and excluded, who with enormous talent and efforts faced the greatest obstacles and managed cultural and social importance—although they were never acknowledged or given the opportunities they deserved—became a highly organized political alternative, an unprecedented project due to its social and progressive potential for the Cuban nation. With the PIC, black Cubans became the precursors of a struggle that would



Evaristo Estenoz and Pedro Ivonet: Founding leaders of the Independent Party of Color

have an important place in the continent's sociopolitical confrontations decades later.

Even at the Republic's dawning, a verifiable, socio-structural discrepancy created dangerous tensions deep within our society. Despite the enormous contributions of black Cubans to our independence, despite the fact that black voters had a considerable impact on the pretensions and possibilities of parties that were establishing hegemony during the past century's first decade, it became obvious that the independence-era dreams of equality and integration were remaining totally unfulfilled.

Even though José Martí and Antonio Maceo could have been significant, determining factors in this search for so necessary a balance in a society with a high degree of racial coexistence, their deaths meant that the republic—despite all its merits—turned black and *mestizo* Cubans into second- and third-rate citizens, and excluded them from

all spaces and possibilities. Kept out of places where they might develop economically, black Cubans remained excluded from public, governmental or military spheres.

The republican frustration of black Cubans turned into a definite political concern. The so desired, nineteenth-century illusion of equality had led the most prominent black leaders to believe that education and culture could gain black Cubans access to the most promising social spaces, and that fighting and working within the established political parties would yield the expected and so yearned for equality and social justice. Yet, it became immediately apparent that trying to be better in order to receive better treatment, and finally be equals, was fruitless in this tropical society of castes. Black politicians and correlative religionaries were never more than interim instruments in the hands of leaders whose interests would never have any relationship with the needs of the always dispossessed and relegated.

So long as those prominent, black leaders and politicians kept dreaming those old and fruitless dreams, a black, pro-independence meritocracy and an intelligentsia with a critical stance, projects and proposals, had leaders capable of mobilizing the masses. In the summer of 1908, this ability and potential joined forces with the already, well-founded concerns of dissatisfied PIC members. This would allow the always excluded and victimized to create a political alternative and project—precisely the important thing that Cuban authorities have never allowed academics to recognize.

Officialdom's academics do not consider the PIC to be the result of very specific, socio-economic factors, of a black Cuban process of political participation and maturation never before seen in the hemisphere. Neither do they value the importance—for all of Cuba—of this political—not racial—party, a party that quickly came to be seen as dangerous to the hegemonic interests of the dominant sector. All this because the PIC's political and social proposals flew in the face of Cuba's sociopolitical reality, its pro-independence hue, the prestige of its leaders' actions, and their ability to connect with the exploited and excluded masses—a principal part of the country's electorate.

The PIC's Political Proposal

- The State's repatriation of any and all Cubans desiring to return to the country who lacked the means with which to do so.
- A review of property deeds that went into effect during the first U.S. intervention (1898-1902).
- A nationalization of work through a law guaranteeing the favorable employment of Cubans over foreigners.
- The distribution of parcels of State lands, or lands acquired for those who lack resources.
- Laws for regulating child labor.
- Accident insurance.
- The creation of a naval and military school.
- Free and mandatory education, including free university-level education.
- No selective immigration policies intending to whiten the country.
- Juries made up of citizens of both races.
- Opposition to the death penalty (blacks were considered its principal victims, because whites were much more likely to have their sentences commuted).
- Penal reform in order to create truly correctional institutions. Most people who went to prison were poor and illiterate, and there was a desire that they be taught skills to facilitate their reintegration into society.
- Workplace courts to mediate disputes between management and labor.
- The naming of Cuban citizens of color to the diplomatic corps.

Many of these proposals and demands were taken up by more progressive, continental parties a number of years later, and became realities forty years before Fidel Castro's document of self-defense, known as *La historia me absolverá* [History Will Absolve Me], for having attacked the Moncada Barracks (1953), became the revolution's political program. Forty years before the so-called Moncada Program, the Independents of Color had already spoken about employment issues, property deeds, and education for all—but with the supreme advantage of also having advocated for black rights and the integration of blacks, something about which *La historia me absolverá* said absolutely nothing.

Even a hundred years after the epic events of 1912, the very same people who forgot to

mention black Cubans in their nation-building project are still not capable of analyzing, acknowledging and valuing the PIC's program. At the hundredth anniversary of the public banquet that was celebrated after the massacre, thirty Cuban ambassadors were invested, and none of them was black. The PIC's demands are still relevant.

Instead of using the hundredth anniversary of these events to deepen the reach and transcendence of this political project in light of all the history that has passed; instead of valuing the currency of many of these demands as important, officialist academics all too often offer treatises that remain far from the source and truth of this extremely complex historical process. Their obvious goal is to support the continued concealment, distortion and manipulation of Cuban history.

We have heard that blacks and whites worked together in the redemptive scrubland, and that it was the Americans who brought racism with them during the military occupation, in 1898. The undeniable fact that black Cubans were the fundamental core of the Liberating Army, and became essential to the struggle, should not camouflage the extent and impact of the racism—sometimes visceral—of some of the independence struggle's greatest leaders, nor the racist injustices and outrages to which many non-white combatants were subjected.

It would seem that this racism has not flagged. We have come to the centennial of 1912 under the ignominious shadow of General President Gómez's statue, which has been reinstated by the revolutionary government on a central Havana thoroughfare. Most academics dare not accusingly point out that Colonel José Francisco Martí Zayas-Bazán was the massacre's principal executor, as Chief of Staff of the genocidal campaign of 1912.*

Worse yet, the cultural authorities, with obvious support from the political leadership, did not limit themselves in ennobling the memory of so despicable a person. Those same people insist upon discrediting and disdain the insurrectional and political leadership of the PIC leaders. Upon their intervention in Cuba, the Americans might have brought their racism with them, but the racism met by the PIC in the Cuban political scene was already a major part of the mentality, culture and social structures of our country.

Likewise, the fact that the PIC took up an armed struggle as a way of exerting pressure has been criticized. The principal error committed by the PIC leaders was to use insurrection—so often engaged in at the time—as a way to generate political pressure. Even General President Gómez resorted to this method in 1906, with help from future PIC leaders, and later, in the “La Chambelona” skirmish (1917), and this did not cause a great tragedy or cause a major loss of life. The PIC leaders did not assess the risk they were taking by being perceived of as a political danger by those in power at the moment.

What one can conclude from what has been said, and the concrete facts, is that the PIC was the victim of a cruel betrayal by General President Gómez, who at a critical time may have forgotten any possible commitment he may have had with his former war buddies. This particular view is furthered by the fact that the PIC leaders did not bother to place any of their white correligionaries in visible, prominent positions, which might have prevented the passing of Morúa Amendment (1910) that made the PIC illegal. The symbolic and bereft uprising of May 29th, 1912, is noteworthy as a sign of the disproportionate confidence the PIC's leadership had in its negotiating power.

The PIC's calls for help from the U.S. government, given the escalated genocidal furor with which the Cuban government responded to their demands, are being presented as evidence of the PIC's assumed annexionist tendencies. Yet, what they really reveal is the surprise and desperation of people who saw themselves caught in an inescapable trap. The spokespeople of those who took power criticize the PIC's supposed violence, by legitimating the terrorist violence and fratricide. It was cruelly decimated without it ever having employed the ample combat experience the majority of its members had.

The PIC is accused of racism today, just as it was before, which causes people to innocently lose sight of the fact that racism is impossible without the power and hegemony needed to disdain and exclude those who are different. The participation of white people in the movement and the nationalist and inclusive project distance from the PIC any suspicion of racial hatred.

In facing this movement, which wanted to promote justice and equality through political and electoral involvement, the government of the moment and hegemonic sectors employed pulled out and employed all their possibly destructive tools: discrediting, slander, legal conviction, incarceration, and legal banning, through the Morúa Amendment—which prohibited parties of only one race or class—and, finally, fratricidal genocide. No one openly said a word against the barbarous massacre of innocents and the condemned, not even for humane reasons. This genocide left behind chilling testimonies and a penetrating fear that has transcended all subsequent eras. The tragedy of 1912 seems to confirm the degree to which the illusion of equality and imposed racist patterns of behavior have significantly

incorporated a culture of subordination and victimization. Even if it was firmly believed that education and culture could help blacks change their status—which has proven to be impossible throughout history—this fratricidal genocide should have been met openly by the relevant party taking power—openly, frontally, and politically. It would seem that the terror was such that anti-racist, black politicians didn't dare even to use civic spaces to condemn the massacre and all the celebration surrounding it. That is the very same silence practiced today by supposedly anti-racist activists in facing the repression of which Cuba's independent movements for integration are victim. This silence is marked by a prevalence of their personal interests when dealing with intolerant hegemony of the authorities, which has caused a mediocre and mediated evaluation of the historical importance and relevance of the PIC. There is also a shameful passivity concerning the disrespectful arrogance of those in power, because they ennoble the memory of the assassins, and do not pay tribute to the deserving heroes and martyrs of 1912. It is clear that there is still a persistent fear of blacks, but it is not due to their supposed violence, but rather the political, intellectual and cultural ability of Cuban blacks, who have always been seen as a threat to hegemonic designs and supremacist frameworks. Today's alleged, anti-racist activists contradict themselves when they point out certain deficiencies and lacunae only to advocate for the nation's unity through the revolution. No matter how innocent, they lose sight of the fact that the 1912 concept of unity served as a pretext to betrayal and genocide. From 1959 forward, it served to shroud in silence the problem, and complicate it in the long term. We cannot speak of unity if one does not acknowl-

edge the intrinsic value of Cuba's African culture, and its role in Cuban culture.

The levels of integration that exist in Cuba may make it impertinent to speak of a nation with two cultures. But we must acknowledge the role and place of African contributions. We cannot speak of unity when our entire socioeconomic and structural reality perpetuate disadvantage, dispossession and marginality for so important a segment of our society. This centennial offers categorical conclusions, beyond the importance and impact of the PIC, that are not diminished because of ignorance of them, or their distortion. The year 2012 will have come and gone, and the authorities and their official spokespeople will not have acknowledged that black Cubans played a pioneering and determining role in the independence struggles of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. It is abundantly clear that they are not interested in including black heroes to a history in which we are still reserved a place as victims, culprits and beneficiaries.

The year 2012 is ending, and the challenge of attaining a rightful place for those heroes and martyrs of so long a struggle for equality and justice may be an incredibly important contribution to the already difficult process of constructing the integrated and just nation of and for which we have dreamed and fought for two hundred years.

Additional reading:

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* Editor's note:

The troops that took part in the campaign against the uprising in Oriente were commanded by Major General José de Jesús Monteagudo and his lieutenant, Brigadier Pablo Mendieta Montefur. Other distinguished leaders were colonels Carlos Machado (2nd Infantry Regiment) and Francisco Paula (Coastal Artillery), Lieutenant Colonels Ibrahín Consuegra (Military Chief of Oriente) and Enrique Quiñones (Mountain Artillery), Commander Rosendo Collazo (Machine Gunnery), Captain Emiliano Amiell (Third Tactician for the Rural Guard) and Lieutenant Arsenio Ortiz. Colonel Martí Zayas-Bazán was Army Chief of Staff, and did not directly participate in the 1912 massacre, but he did attend the post-massacre, "monstrous banquet" in Central Park (Havana).