

Blacks and Criollos in the Formation of the National Consciousness

Walterio Carbonell
Historian

Introduction

The sixties, during which Walterio Carbonell writes or 'dictates' Cómo surgió la cultura nacional, justify the anti-Enlightenment Romanticism of the Revolution. More as an ideological manifesto than a poetic affiliation, that is not to say that the Revolution did not or will not finally achieve its utopia, but rather that this utopia can be found, already realized, in its past, in its origins.

The most integral manifesto of this "sixties Romanticism" can be found in the book Mirar a los 60. Antología cultural de una década [Looking at the 60s. Cultural Anthology of a Decade] (La Habana: Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes, 2004). From its very first page, its author, Ambrosio Fornet, sets aside his tendency toward heavy-handed eponyms and talks to us about "a prodigious decade."

At revolutionarily foundational times such as those, a book written to analyze the origins of the national culture necessarily had to dialog with live interlocutors. As Carbonell correctly asserts, this did not include Francisco de Arango y Parreño and José Antonio Saco but rather their "representatives." Not those who echoed Iberian metropolitanism, but its Gallic ramblings.

In summary, there are two simultaneous contexts in the very same pages of Cómo surgió la cultura nacional: the ideological-institutional debate about the origins of the Cuban Revolution, and the Algerian decolonization process and the position of the French elite in view of that process.

What brings all this together and makes the book relevant to our most daily existence are Walterio Carbonell's spiritual and revolutionary qualities: as an intellectual, he is fully situated within the flow of his histories, of all his histories.

With this in mind, the journal ISLAS has decided to pay homage to him by presenting excerpts from Cómo surgió la cultura nacional.

Emilio Ichikawa

*Excerpts from the book *Cómo surgió la cultura nacional [How the National Culture Emerged],*
by renowned Cuban historian Walterio
Carbonell.*

Was our culture born from something...? Of course. From the Spaniards and Africans within our colonial system. Were Saco and Varela born from something...? Of course: from Spanish culture. They wrote in excellent Spanish and the internal logic of their writings was at the same level as Spanish culture's internal logic. A people have to have lived for many centuries to be able to create a culture characterized by writers who possess the intellectual quality and language elegance of men like Saco and Del Monte.

No serious scholar of culture could possibly state that a people, of its own accord, could attain Cuba's level of intellectual development in the nineteenth century after only two and a half centuries of existence. If in the nineteenth century there was high culture in our country, it is because high colonial culture was not ours, i.e., it was not produced in an authentic manner. Instead, it is equivalent to high Spanish culture.

The creative processes in England, France, Germany or Russia required many centuries to reach the level of intellectual development that existed in nineteenth-century Cuba. Thus, how were we supposed to reach this same level in only two and a half centuries when others have taken many more, unless we were more intelligent than all the others? Moreover, since a statement such as the one conjectured above is completely unfounded, we must deduce that if the character of the nineteenth century in Cuba produced writers of the level of Saco, Varela or Del Monte, it must be

because those gentlemen and that culture are nothing more than an actual extension or manifestation of Spanish culture.

What were the circumstances under which Spaniards and Africans divested themselves of their psychic and cultural formations in Cuba? Under which conditions did they acquire a new psychic and cultural formation that allowed them to identify themselves as Cubans? One must ask this question and adequately answer it to understand how the Nation and the national culture came into being. Those patriotic invocations, still currently used by bourgeois historians, have shed little light on these matters. Furthermore, if the revolutionaries of the new generation wish to adequately resolve these issues regarding the formation of the Nation and its national culture, they should avoid following trite approaches. They should begin by studying social relations during slavery, from the perspective of class struggle, from the sixteenth century to the end of the nineteenth century.

There is no progress to be made by utilizing 'patriotic' vocabulary. The appearance of a Cuban type and the formation of the Cuban Nation and a national culture must be explained in the context of the economic relations within which the Spanish and African populations existed and functioned. "The production of ideas, of representations and consciousness are intimately related to the material activity and commerce of the time: they are the stuff of real life. The representation of thought, of intellectual commerce appears

here as a direct result of their material behavior” (Karl Marx, *La ideología alemana*).

On the other hand, neither the Nation nor the national culture is exactly the same as social classes—they are products of them. One can deduce from this that the problem of the formation of a nation and a national culture requires an analysis that goes beyond one that looks only at the society’s material conditions and its class conflicts. In the case of Cuba, things become further complicated because before and during the nineteenth century there was not just a conflict between the two foundational classes—the slave and the slave-owners—but also between the psychic and cultural formation of the Spanish and African populations.

The only thing that separated the slave owning landowners from the metropolis was a politico-economic problem—not a cultural one. It was never the case that the colonial “Criollos” fought to defend their culture. In this respect, their entire opus was Spanish poetry with a patriotic Cuban accent. I am not referring here to the fact that they created something different, because these creations were of little value. It was the same Spanish culture, but degenerated and impoverished by the colonial system.

Yet, this should not lead one to conclude that the politico-economic conflict between the slave owning landowners and the metropolis did not also contribute to the formation of a national culture. We have already acknowledged that the greatest contribution to the national culture actually was the Ten Years War, which was led by slave owning landowners. Of course, in regards to the creation of a culture distinct from the Spanish and African ones, things happen in a different manner: it is the slave—slave owner conflict and their opposing cultures that most contribute to the formation of a national heritage.

The black—Criollo conflict was expected to produce more flattering results in the formation of a national culture than the Criollo—Spanish rivalry. In the midst of these class and miscegenous struggles, more flattering and also more tragic, the Spanish and African cultures of Cuba became weakened and impoverished.

So-called “Criollo” culture has its apogee around 1830: Varela, Saco, José de la Luz y Caballero, Del Monte. After that everything goes into steady decline. The essential reason for this culture’s decadence is the colonial system. From every viewpoint, the black—“Criollo” dialectic is much more interesting because at its core were the truly contradictory elements of colonial society. Not only because slaves and slave owners were the principal agents of the historic future, but also due to the fact that their cultures were openly battling because their constitutive values came from different cultures.

On what basis could the Spanish spoken by the white population battle against the language of the Peninsular Spaniards? Could the Catholicism of the colonial functionaries ever combat the Catholicism of the “Criollo” population? The conflict between the culture of the “Criollos” and that of the metropolis was somehow illogical.

Culturally speaking, the Criollo situation has nothing in common with that of the Algerian population, which has its own religion, language and set of habits and customs that are distinct from those of the colonial French culture. Only Cuba’s African population was in a situation similar to that of the Algerians now.

Cuba’s blacks spoke their own dialects, had religions, music, habits, customs and a worldview different from that of the white colonizing population. The conflict between the Spanish and African population was thus

inevitable, not only in terms of class conflict but also culturally.

The traditional framework

Historians have not availed themselves of this real framework to examine the origins and development of the national consciousness or culture. What framework have they used? The one that has the existing contradictions between the Spanish monarchy and the slave owning “Criollos” at the core of society’s fundamental contradictions. Historians extremely exaggerate the importance of these contradictions between 1800 and 1850. They forget that during that time “Criollos” were the most active instruments of Spanish colonialism because they were the direct exploiters of slave labor.

On the other hand, they also practically reduce to nothing the importance of the antagonism between slaves and slave owners, which by the way, is at the crux of all of colonial society’s contradictions. Via this falsified framework, the national consciousness seems like an ill-gotten fruit born of the friction between the monarchy and its own colonial instruments—the “Criollo” slave owners.

In Europe, the question of national consciousness is considered a difficult subject. It is a topic about which there is discussion and books are written. For example, among French specialists, no one would dare suggest that this issue of national formation has been resolved. Yet, in the Cuban case, this problem is considered really easy; it’s resolved with four or five categorical utterances!

But, let us thoroughly examine the framework through which the historian might discover the origin and development of the Cuban national consciousness:

First step: The historian must be at peace with his or her own conscience. He or she must

have an *a priori* knowledge of for which social class destiny has reserved patriotic impulses. Who are these people? The slave owners, that little group that controlled the economy during the colonial period. On the other side of this, we have thousands and thousands of slaves and freemen, unable to feel patriotism on their own. This is no less than the vast majority of the population.

Second step: Once the historian has made an *a priori* choice, he or she then proceeds to take account of the times at which the interests of the richest, slave owning landowners come into direct conflict with those of the businessmen and the metropolis. According to the historian’s framework regarding the contradiction of the interested, since the interests of the vast majority of the colonial population, made up of slaves and non-slave owning free men are not in contradiction with those of the businessmen and the Spanish metropolis and, moreover, the immense majority of the population is not heard by the captains general or the king, or the courts, one must conclude that either the colonial population is not nationalistic and has no national consciousness, or that the only thing that is represented is, quite simply, the nationalist consciousness of the “educated classes.”

According to the historian’s framework, the “Criollo,” or better yet, the landowning slave owner, is the father of nationalism. What about the fundamental contradiction of colonial, slave—slave owning society? Nonsense!

The antagonism created by this fundamental contradiction is of no interest to anyone. Considering secondary contradictions, the historian has only to account for the political and economic factors of the metropolis and the landowning slave owners. It is from this opposition that the national consciousness and culture are born. This is all very humorous, right?

Here is another ‘humorous’ variant that attempts to explain the origin of the national consciousness: one fine day, the contradictory interests came into crisis, to the extent that even the intellectuals went home to their institutions at the Colegio San Carlos. With artistic meticulousness, they decided to shape the indifferent consciousness of their students and make them good Cuban revolutionaries.

What does this mean? It was the teachers in the intellectual sphere that prepared the 1868 revolution. The slave owning ideologues prepared the Cuban revolution just like the encyclopedists “prepared” the French revolution. Curious. No?

Finally, one can surmise from reading any of the huge historical tomes that are going around that the slave owning landowners labored, to the point of exhaustion, at the Havana Ayuntamiento, in the Consulate, in the Sociedad Económica de Amigos del País, at the palace of the wealthy Aldama. They traveled to Spain and to the United States; worked out annexationist and reform projects; and, thanks to all that fervent activity, the national consciousness and culture appeared.

Another example of how the national consciousness was formed: in 1837, the monarchy leaves the illustrious landowning-slave owning class without representation in the courts. Then there are shouts and protests. The “Criollos” cry out in fear because of the “terror” imposed by Tacón. Were they ever afraid of the terror they, themselves, imposed on the slaves?

Another example on the same subject: O’Donnell gets Luz y Caballero and Domingo del Monte mixed up in the 1844 black slave conspiracy. Luz is offended at being called a conspirator, and upon rejecting the accusation, writes one of the most important pages in Cuban history. In the Escalera process, Cubanness reached its loftiest heights. What cynicism!

But, finally, the result of Luz’s elevated attitude was not delayed: the Havana club was founded in 1847. Aldama becomes the center of all the conspiratorial intrigue created in the club. The bold conspirator holds secret meetings within his palace walls and with his friends decides to incorporate Cuba into the United States. This was the best way to guarantee the survival of slavery. The proof of Aldama’s patriotic wisdom is in the fact that he thought nothing of associating his activities with those of Cisneros Betancourt, who via his “committee” in New York had carried out laudatory work.

On the other hand, the American general, William J. Wright, agreed to invade the island for a sum of three million dollars. What joy! The landowners of California, New Mexico and Texas had agreed to incorporate Cuba into the American Union.

Isn’t Cuba the best base from which to extend toward South America and also a route to the gateway of the Pacific, Panama, to be able to go towards China?