

Juan Gualberto Gómez
and W.E.B. Du Bois:

National versus Racial Identity in Cuba and the United States

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"We are all Cubans, nothing more."
Juan Gualberto Gómez, La Igualdad, May 30;1893

"One feels his two-ness - an American, a Negro, two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings, two warring ideals in one dark body.

W. E. B. Du Bois, "Strivings of the Negro People", 1897

These statements made by two leading black intellectuals—one from Cuba and one from the United States—reveal two important differences in the identity of blacks in the Western Hemisphere. In Cuba, blacks minimize their racial identity and stress their national identity. "I don't feel particularly black", a dark-skinned Cuban commented in Santiago, "I feel Cuban". A retired diplomat, also dark-skinned, admitted, "we don't have a strong racial identity". Nor do Cuban blacks seem nostalgic about their

once-flourishing but now-defunct clubs of the pre-Castro era. A professor, when asked about the demise of the clubs, replied "We don't need them now; we are integrated as Cubans". Even Afro-Cuban cults like Santería are not racially exclusive and welcome whites as adherents. This is in sharp contrast with the United States, where racial identity continues to compete strongly with national identity.

Differences in the identity of Blacks in the United States and Cuba have historical roots. One difference was the greater exclu-

sion of blacks from American society. For example, it was not until the 1950s that the United States Supreme Court declared racial segregation unconstitutional. Then, in the 1960s, the Supreme Court outlawed impediments that disallowed Blacks the right to vote and participate in interracial marriages. The Cuban Republic never experienced such legalized racial discrimination.

Another difference stemmed from the distinctive nature of Cuba's independence struggle. For instance, in Cuba, black slaves were needed and welcomed in the struggle for independence. They represented about fifty percent of the troops and forty percent of the officers in the Liberation Army. Afro-Cuban rebels, the mambises, fought tenaciously and General Antonio Maceo, a mulatto, was revered by whites as well as blacks. On the other hand, American independence was achieved at a time when slavery was the law of the land. Even independence leaders, such as presidents George Washington and Thomas Jefferson, were major slaveholders in America.

Cuban blacks won independence for the nation at the same time they won freedom for themselves, even though this freedom did not mean equality. Jose Martí, who was called the Father of Cuban Independence, linked the struggle for independence with the struggle for racial equality, universal manhood suffrage, and a nationality that transcended race. The Cuban Constitution of 1901 guaranteed racial equality at a time when in the United States the federal Constitution was being reinterpreted to segregate the races and state constitutions were being re-written to disenfranchise blacks.

Cuban blacks confronted discrimination by emphasizing their patriotism rather than denying it. This response established a

tradition that has persisted to the present. A tradition that survived even the horrors of the "Race War" of 1912 and explains why Cuban blacks, much more than their counterparts in the United States, have consistently emphasized cubanidad and opposed racial separatism and black nationalism. As a result, Cuban blacks have not had the troubling sense of "two-ness" that bedeviled blacks in America. Blacks living in Cuba consider themselves Black. Cubans while many blacks in America consider themselves at least as much black as American.

Differences in the two identities can clearly be seen in the life and philosophy of two men— Juan Gualberto Gómez and W.E.B. Du Bois—who have each been considered the voice of their people. Development of a national identity that transcended race was the fervid goal of Juan Gualberto Gómez who was generally considered the ideological leader of Cuba's blacks from the 1880s until his death in 1933. Gómez', a dark-skinned mulatto, was born in 1854 to slaves on a Matanzas sugar plantation. His parents purchased his freedom before birth and, with the blessing of their master, sent him to study in Paris. There he joined a circle of Cubans interested in independence.

After returning to Cuba, Gómez became a personal friend of Jose Martí and other revolutionary leaders. He wrote for liberal and independence-minded newspapers, notably *La Lucha*, *El Abolicionista*, *La Tribuna*, *El Progreso*, and *El Pueblo*. He also founded two race-oriented newspapers in Cuba, *La Fraternidad* (Fraternity) and *La Igualdad* (Equality). He used this media to help convince black Cubans that the struggle for independence was intimately linked with the struggle for abolition and black advancement. Further, he worked to

unite Cuba's colored societies and established the first Central Directory of the Societies of the Colored Race in order to protest discrimination and support the independence struggle. Through these activities he became, in the minds of most Cubans and in his own words, "the voice of his race."

Gómez's strong sense of Cuban identity is evident in his writings, such as his famous statement: "We are all Cubans, nothing more". He nourished Cubans' sense of a common nationality and assured whites that Cuba would not be another Haiti. He argued that racial animosities resulted from the fact that the extension of political rights had been initiated from the outside, by France, and resisted by local whites and slave owners. In Cuba, however, "the first ideas favorable to the freedom of Negroes were born in the colony itself", by whites who "from the first day ... recognized the legal right of equality and proclaimed the blacks citizens". During the Revolution, he continued to write that, whites "opened the doors to honors, and blacks rose to the highest levels of the army."

Black military leaders sacrificed immediate personal and racial interests in order not to jeopardize the war effort. For instance, Gómez cited General Antonio Maceo, a bitter opponent of slavery and racism and second in command of the rebel forces, who said that devotion to Cuba's independence kept him from insisting on being named chief of the Liberation Army. "[A] movement directed by a man of color," he told Gómez, "will always be vulnerable ... This I do to benefit the Fatherland, and to benefit the ideals which we cherish." Gómez saw Maceo's sacrifice as one that typified blacks' commitment to the national cause: "[T]he Fatherland which we were going to

create was going to be sweet and desirable for all the inhabitants of Cuba. Ah! The former slave was going to have his seat in the family house; it was just, therefore, that the former Spanish father also preserved his seat ... the aim of the war was that we should build a nationality, with all its elements."

Gómez's and others hope that independence would usher in an era of racial harmony was only partly fulfilled. The Constitution of 1901 guaranteed the equality of all Cubans, however blacks were muscled out of key governmental and military positions even before the end of the war for independence. Furthermore, during two periods of occupation in Cuba (1898-1902 and 1906-1909), Americans imposed, as best they could, their styles of racial segregation.

Race relations improved somewhat after the Americans withdrew from Cuba, but growing black anger led to outright confrontation when ex-General Evaristo Estenoz, a light-skinned mulatto. Estenoz began a race-based political organization, the Independent Party of Color, in 1908. However, he received little popular support. He was opposed by most blacks, was rarely invited to address Negro societies, and had difficulty even getting enough signatures to be placed on the ballot.

In 1912, the Cuban Army smashed the *estenocistas* with great brutality, killing perhaps 4,000 people, mainly defenseless women and children who were not involved in the rebellion. The scale of this massacre sent shock waves throughout black Cuba and left a residue of fear and depression. This massacre, however, did not destroy blacks' sense of national identity. Instead, it reflected the strength of their original patriotism by the fact that the massacre was not followed by repressive measures. There

was no reign of terror and no effort at disenfranchisement. The status quo ante was restored, and mainstream parties continued vying for black votes. A few blacks won national political positions, but most received patronage sinecures with little responsibility and low pay.

Racial malaise caused even Gómez to become disturbed by what he termed “the sad realities” of the day. Nevertheless, he kept the faith, and urged blacks to remember that they “have a free Fatherland, although it is incomplete, although it is full of imperfections.” He concluded that, with continuing progress, racial barriers “will fall, like the Biblical Wall of Jericho, at the sound of the trumpets of Progress, Liberty, and Patriotism of all good Cubans.”

Just as an overriding sense of national identity among black Cubans was reflected and shaped by Gómez, W. E. B. Du Bois articulated the troubled nature of black identity in the United States. Also, similar to Gómez, who was considered the voice of black Cuba, Du Bois, who authored more than five hundred essays, poems, books, pamphlets and novels, was considered the voice of black America.

Born in 1868, Du Bois spent most of his life living, working and studying in interracial settings where he developed a strong racial identity. He was raised in a small town in Massachusetts, a state known for its strong abolitionist tradition. He enjoyed a childhood free of overt discrimination. As one of only twenty-five blacks in the town, he attended a white church, compiled an outstanding academic record, and was encouraged by his school principal to attend college. He attended college on a town-sponsored scholarship.

Du Bois’first immersion in black society happened during his undergraduate years



Juan Gualberto Gómez.

at Fisk University, a black college in Tennessee. In writing back to his local minister, the light-skinned Du Bois exulted: “I am a Negro; and I glory in the name! I am proud of the black blood that flows in my veins. From all the recollections dear to boyhood have I come here, not to pose as a critic but to join hands with this, my people.” After graduation, he returned to Massachusetts to pursue graduate work at Harvard and once again achieved success in an integrated environment. He won the admiration of his professors, graduated with honors, and was chosen to speak at the commencement exercises. His dissertation (on the African slave trade) was published as part of Harvard’s Historical Studies and, in 1892, he won a fellowship to do post-graduate studies at the University of Berlin.

Unlike Gómez, who felt accepted by whites, Du Bois usually considered himself an outsider. He was proud, shy, and

extremely sensitive to racial slights. He often withdrew from whites as a youth and was critical of them as an adult. He first learned he was “different” when a little girl refused his card during a game with other children. Thereafter, he never socialized with the town’s whites unless first asked. While at Fisk, he accidentally bumped a white woman and was shocked when, despite apologies, she burst into a rage. Long afterwards he avoided situations in which he had to show courtesies to whites. At Harvard he felt “in Harvard but not of Harvard”. After being rejected (on racial grounds, he believed) by the Harvard Glee Club, Du Bois never sought acceptance by white students.

Only in Europe did Du Bois feel comfortable around whites. There he let down his racial guard. In fact, in Berlin, the Germans gave him a sense of universal, non-racial humanity. However, he was made painfully aware of his troubled national identity. As his companions sang the German national anthem, he said, “[I] began to feel that dichotomy which all my life has characterized my thought: how far can love for my oppressed race accord with love for the oppressing country?”

Upon returning to the United States in 1894, the rapidly deteriorating position of blacks and the rise of racism undermined Du Bois’ hope that reason, scholarship and facts, plus the cultural and economic elevation of blacks, would solve America’s racial problem. The gains of the post-emancipation era were fast eroding; violence, segregation, disenfranchisement, and a virulent Negrophobia stalked the land. In 1896, the United States Supreme Court declared racial segregation constitutional. The following year Du Bois expressed his racial dilemma by commenting that: “One feels his



W. E. B. Du Bois

two-ness - an American, a Negro, two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings, two warring ideals in one dark body ... The history of the American Negro is the history of this strife - the longing to attain self-conscious manhood, to merge his double self into a better and truer self.”

Du Bois’ sense of an interracial humanity, which he had picked up in Europe, preserved his faith in racial integration and enabled him to work with whites. In contrast to the situation in Cuba, the United States had a small but dedicated cadre of white liberals - Jews, social workers, and descendants of abolitionists committed to working for racial justice. They did this primarily through their work with the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) where Du Bois served as editor of the Association’s magazine, *Crisis*. Du Bois was a supporter of socialism and unionism at a time when most



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unions excluded blacks. He used union labor to publish the *Crisis* magazine even though this denied work to black typesetters. His most striking exhibition of patriotism came during the World War I when he urged blacks to “close ranks” and support America’s fight for democracy in Europe. In the 1920s, he opposed Marcus Garvey, America’s leading black nationalist, who reciprocated Du Bois’ personal dislike.

Du Bois also had a separatist impulse. He fervently wanted to see African and African-American racial solidarity, thus he organized the Pan-African Congresses and wrote on the “peculiar” Negro genius. During the Depression of the 1920-30s, which had devastating consequences for ordinary black folk, Du Bois became increasingly pessimistic, questioned the progress made in race relations, and became doubtful that further progress would help the masses. When he expressed his doubts in

the *Crisis* magazine by criticizing the NAACP for not promoting “positive” segregation in the form of separate institutions and businesses, he raised the ire of the organization and, thus, resigned in 1934.

By the 1950s Du Bois was estranged from both black and white America, and increasingly drawn to the socialist and Communist critique of America. Tragically, his estrangement came as racial progress began to accelerate. In the 1930s, when Franklin D. Roosevelt was president, his administration instituted policies that benefited blacks and other poor Americans. Unions, particularly industrial unions, began admitting blacks and America’s fight against Nazi Germany and its racist policies had weakened the respectability of racism at home. Further, Jackie Robinson, a black baseball player, had integrated the national sport and the NAACP was laying the legal groundwork for an assault on segregation

that climaxed with the United States Supreme Court's 1954 decision that ordered the nation's schools to be desegregated. In the 1950s and 1960s, however, Du Bois was on the sidelines, writing for leftist and Communist publications that belittled the civil rights movement. He was pleasantly surprised by the Supreme Court decision of 1954. Although giving only grudging compliments to the NAACP, he doubted that progress would continue. Finally, in 1961, at the age of ninety-three, he joined the Communist Party, renounced his American citizenship, and moved to Ghana. Two years later, on the day of Martin Luther King's triumphant "I Have a Dream" speech at the March on Washington, Du Bois died a Communist while in bitter African exile.

Overall, these two men—Gómez and Du Bois—operated in different contexts. If Cuban independence was linked with emancipation and legal equality, America's independence was linked to the expansion of slavery and Jim Crow legislation. While Céspedes freed his slaves and led them into battle, and Martí worked for racial democracy, in the United States, George Washington, the first American president, was a major slave owner who opposed general emancipation and Abraham Lincoln, another American president, emancipated the slaves only reluctantly and hoped that they would settle in another country. Emancipation probably had a positive psychological impact on the freedmen. For instance, an officer reported that his troops spontaneously began to sing "My Country 'Tis of Thee" after he read them the Emancipation Proclamation. Their sense of national identification must have been weakened by the collapse of Reconstruction and the virulent racism that ensued. This

was the context, which shaped Du Bois' racial identity.

One cannot say that Du Bois "typified" mainstream black thought, because there was no one mainstream. The example he set is especially pertinent because he embodied two principal streams of thought: the integration philosophy of the NAACP and the separatism philosophy of Marcus Garvey. His expression of this duality, this two-ness, has become a celebrated phrase for expressing the dilemma of blacks in the United States.

Like Du Bois, many black Americans have never resolved the dilemma of divided identity. The separatism of Garvey and Malcolm X existed alongside the integration philosophy of the NAACP and Dr. Martin Luther King. The persistence of these two streams of thought shows how the tensions of racial versus national identity continue to plague blacks in the United States and set them apart, at least psychologically, from their counterparts in Cuba.