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Cubanness and Cuban Identity: the Importance of Fernando Ortiz

This past July 16, the work of Fernando Ortiz was declared a National Heritage. It was a moving moment, charged with a particular electric spirituality, one I shared with Barnet, Eusebio, Torres-Cuevas and others, and an act of justice regarding an essential component of the foundations of our culture and the nation itself.

In his 1949 essay “Los factores humanos de la cubanidad,” (The human factors of Cubanness), Ortiz asserted: “There are Cubans who do not want to be Cuban, and are even ashamed and deny what they are.” Among these people, “Cubanness lacks completion, it is castrated.” It is not enough, Ortiz insisted “to have in Cuba a birthplace, nation, life, and behavior.” Something more is needed: “the consciousness of being Cuban and the will to be so are necessary.” He makes a distinction between “Cubanness, the generic condition of being Cuban, and full Cuban identity, heartfelt, conscious, and desired.”

Others among our intellectuals, within the neo-colonial republic, identified different ways of seeing ourselves as Cubans.

Elías Entralgo differentiated “progressive Cuban identity” from a conservative “stationary” identity. The latter, he said, motivated “the volunteer corps under Spanish domination, facing the insurrections of 1868 and 1895.”

José Antonio Foncueva counterpoises “disinterested, comprehensive, visionary patriotism” to the “myopic,” “declarative” Cubans, accusing these of being “traitors to the

most important and legitimate interests of the country, who claim to possess a great patriotic sensibility.”

Jorge Ibarra studied the “Roosevelt myth” promoted by certain influential sectors on the island before the death of the Yankee politician and military man in 1919. Considering him a supposed fighter for the freedom of Cuba, a loving “father” of Platt’s republic, there were those who came to compare Theodore Roosevelt with our greatest heroes. Nothing is further from Cubanness than this shameful idealization.

That same year, 1919, José Antonio Ramos asserted that colonial pseudo-folkloric visions were still alive in the Republic. For many people, he says, the only thing that is genuinely Cuban is what the colony allowed us: “the blackface comic, the mulatta, the hammock, tobacco, the guajira, rumba, the stylish cantúa, admiration and preference for everything foreign”.

There are very entertaining pro-annexation rumberos, who perform a clever repertory of “cubanisms,” enjoy rum, dominoes, a good cigar, strong coffee, and laugh at Pepito jokes, cry when they hear a bolero, and always wear a medal of Our Lady of Cobre around their necks. They are active practitioners of external Cubanness; but far removed from Cuban identity.

I know of one notable case: Guillermo Cabrera Infante, very Cuban in his narrative, his linguistic fireworks, and openly pro-annexation in thought and soul. His collection of articles, *Mea Cuba* (1992), is scandalously pro-U.S. He ferociously criticizes all anti-imperialist thinking that has developed in Cuba and our region. He considers the very concept of Latin America as a “one more cliché from the professional left.”

He discounts Martí as a fanatic who sought a “romantic death,” in *Dos Ríos*, with a “calculated suicide.” He interprets Martí’s reference to the “brutal and turbulent North” as the root of another left wing “cliché,” North-South duality. He reminds us that Cuba is “forever, 90 miles from the U.S. coast,” which defines our destiny and fatally condemns us to subordination. “Geopolitics are more decisive than politics,” Cabrera repeats over and over. He is someone who uses his talent and sense of humor to play with the external expressions of our culture, but belongs to the species of “castrated” Cubans.

I think that among those born in Cuba (living here or anywhere else in the world), very few are capable of disparaging Martí and promoting the annexation of our country by the

United States. I know many emigrants who defend their identity on a daily basis, not with empty rituals, but as something meaningful, and consider their Cubanness precious.

Fernando Ortiz invited us to embrace our condition as Cubans with an ethical commitment to the collective efforts of our people, to work on a common project to develop “a full, heartfelt, conscious, and desired Cuban identity.” Let us listen to him and continue to nurture his work.

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