

WHAT IF... FULGENCIO BATISTA HAD BEEN BLACK?

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El dominio de Batista sobre la vida política trajo ciertos cambios para los negros cubanos: el ex sargento era obviamente un mulato y, a pesar de su traición a la revolución de 1933,... Batista realizó—proponiéndoselo o no—varias tareas de importancia revolucionaria.

—Lourdes Casal (1979 quote from *Cultura Afrocubana*,² pp. 390–391)

Fulgencio Batista was... working class, mixed-blood cane cutter, water-boy, tailor, carpenter and railroad brakeman...

—Enrique Oltuski (Minister of Communications under Castro, 2002 quote from *Vida Clandestina*,³ p. 290)

Despite the fact that his contemporaries, including many supporters of Fidel Castro, acknowledged that Fulgencio Batista Zaldívar was either a mulatto or a man of mixed race, many writers in the Twenty First Century have ignored his Afro-Cuban roots and possibly his aboriginal ancestry. This has happened for two related reasons: Batista did not have a dark enough complexion to be considered black (negro), and conceding his mixed race challenged the perception of widespread discrimination in Cuba prior to the Castro revolution.

This paper claims both that Batista was a man of mixed race and that race is not a social construct, an assumption that obfuscates the discussion of racial issues. Race can be defined objectively in terms of genetic markers, the way it is now done by scientists all

over the world, including those in Cuba working at the National Centre of Medical Genetics of the Medical University of Havana. This paper also argues that charges of widespread racism in pre-revolutionary Cuba are unfounded, and in disagreement with the view of highly respected scholars. The author argues that many blacks and mixed race people in Cuba (including the strongman, then president, and finally dictator Batista, and such well-known heroes and politicians as Juan Gualberto Gómez and Martín Morúa Delgado) played significant roles in Cuban history. It is ironic that the only often-cited and famous Cuban of mixed race (and aspiring politician) is Nicolás Guillén Batista, who was no different from Fulgencio Batista Zaldívar in terms of skin color. Guillén's second surname is politely ignored, and his wealthy family background (including that of his father, who was also of mixed race and a Senator in the Cuban Republic) are never mentioned. The paper closes with a brief comparison of racial policies in the US and Cuba, showing that the democratic process in America was far more compromised than in Cuba, especially in the first half of the Twentieth Century.

If Fulgencio Batista had been black (in the sense that *no one could pretend* that he was not of African descent), then Cuban historiography could not deny the significance of an Afro-Cuban becoming a freely elected President of the Republic in the year 1940. It

1. This is a condensed version of the original paper. Readers interested in the full version may contact the author at The College of the Holy Cross, Worcester, MA. Please write to nsanchez@holycross.edu. The author thanks Frank Martínez for his assistance in preparing the audio-visual presentation for the annual conference

2. Castellanos, Jorge & Isabel. 1990. *Cultura Afrocubana*, Vol 2. Ediciones Universal: Miami, FL.

3. Oltuski, Enrique. 2002. *Vida Clandestina: My Life in the Cuban Revolution*, Wiley.

would be as if future American historians denied that President Barack Obama was the first black President of the United States. Such denial would represent a refutation that a tremendous amount of progress in racial relations had occurred in the US by 2008. In Batista's case, the Cuban people should be proud that a man of African ancestry had been elected president of Cuba in 1940, a fact that is hardly ever acknowledged. Cuban history is being rewritten before our very eyes, the way it has been rewritten about Charles Curtis, the American Vice President under Herbert Hoover, who was a Native-American, president of the US Senate, US Congressman and even a famous child-hero raised for some time in an Indian reservation: his heritage is known by practically no one in this country.

THE CONCEPT OF RACE

The concept of race has a long history, but one can argue that one of the earliest scientific discussions about race occurs with Charles Darwin, whose great book on evolution was entitled *On the Origins of Species by Means of Natural Selection, Or the Preservation of Favored Races in the Struggle for Life*. Several people have noted how the subtitle of his book is usually repressed in discussions about evolution, for the apparent reason that it is politically incorrect to associate Darwin with any discussion about race. This is done despite the fact that Darwin wrote a second famous book entitled *The Descent of Man, and Selection in Relation to Sex*. There, he explicitly discussed the differences among human races and expressed great disdain for "savage races;" but in the end, he felt that human races did not refer to human sub-species, claiming that there was only one species of humankind.

It is not uncommon for scientific concepts to change. Our *original* concepts of space, time and race have turned out to be wrong. Yet even when these concepts were misleading, Newton in physics, and many others in anthropology, sociology, and even econom-

ics were able to discover relationships and make predictions that turned out to be useful in our understanding of both the physical world and the social sciences. Governments wisely or unwisely cooperated in gathering crude observations about the races of humankind in specific countries. That such data were misused had nothing to do with the relevance or validity of any of the three concepts.

What needs to be understood is the difference between *empirical* concepts and laws and *theoretical* concepts and laws.⁴ The difference between the old and the new abstractions is that theoretical concepts and laws have no right or wrong *definitions*, because these are embedded in mathematical structures that are subject to strict logical rules. Hence, both space and time, after Newton, were determined to possess mathematical characteristics that are independent of our common experiences. Equally, we need to think of race in theoretical terms. Today, races refer to different populations of humankind, which can be separated and defined according to the genetic structures of those populations. The differences, as we now know, arose as a result of physical separation, founding effects, natural selection, mutations, sexual selection and developmental stress. The concept of race, in *theoretical* terms, is neither right nor wrong: It is simply a useful term that is subject to improvements as we gain a better understanding of its significance in an overall theoretical structure.

Employing genetic markers, one can extract (with the help of cluster analysis) distinctive races. This is known as racial population naturalism,⁵ and it leads to three variant (yet related) theoretical concepts of race. The first is cladistic races (or populations), which are those that share a common ancestor. The second is socially isolated races, which have arisen as a result of social pressures, yet have produced specific clusters of genes—such as those of African-Americans. Most people do not realize that there are now medical treatments in the US that have been ap-

4. Rudolph Carnap, *Philosophical Foundations of Physics; An Introduction to the Philosophy of Science*, 1966, Basic Books, is a clear statement of the principles involved.

5. See the article on "Race" at the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, which was last revised on February 17, 2016. <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/race/> Consulted in June, 2017.

proved *only* for people of African American ancestry. Finally, there are genetically clustered races which are related to racial categories associated with specific geographic regions and phenotypes. It should be noted in passing that genes influence behavior, such as aggression, which is far more manifest in males than in females, for both human and nonhuman animals. Those interested in this issue should consult the article on the “Genetic Basis of Behavior” in the *Biology Encyclopedia* available on the web.⁶

RACES IN CUBA

Scientists all over the world have rushed to determine not just the racial composition of their countries’ populations, but also to link their findings to medical issues. Many findings are often reported in the journal *PLoS Genetics*. Cuban scholars in Cuban universities have done exactly that. It turns out that the racial composition of the Cuban people is made up of three ancestral races: Europeans, Africans and Native Americans, for lack of a better term. The Y chromosomes of Cuban males reflect mainly their European and African ancestries, while the mitochondrial DNA of the Cuban females reflect mainly aboriginal (“Indian”) and African ancestries. However, since Cubans were taught incorrectly about the disappearance of the aboriginal populations, very few Cubans refer to themselves as having Indian ancestry. This makes some sense because Indian descent originates almost exclusively on the maternal side of the genetic ancestry. In other words, there are no “pure” Indians in Cuba, but only some people of mixed Indian ancestry (who also have European and African ancestors.)

Cuban scholars in the island have published academic papers linking race to medical issues for possibly one decade. Regrettably, the early papers related to medical treatments were not reflective of the racial composition of the Cuban people *as a whole*. This changed with a massive study conducted in Cuba in 2013 and published one year later.⁷ While the lead-

ing author is from Cuba (and worked at the National Centre of Medical Genetics of the Medical University of Havana), most collaborators came from Denmark, Cuba and Spain, in that order, plus one from Canada and one from Saudi Arabia. Their academic backgrounds were mainly in Medicine and Genetics, but two were anthropologists. The massive research effort involved 1,019 *adults* randomly chosen from all Cuban provinces, the use of 128 autosomal ancestry Informative markers, quantitative estimates of skin pigmentation, and markers for the mtDNA and the Y chromosome. These are the main results:

1. Admixture proportions for the population as a whole were 72% European (range 4.3% to 98.2%); 20% African (range 0.8% to 95.2) and 8% Native American (range 0.4% to 34%). Large racial differences were found among the provinces.
2. Very high and *highly significant* correlations between the self-reported racial categories and the ancestry markers; in fact, there were only 65 discrepancies among the 1,019 subjects! [The people seemed to know their own ancestry!].
3. There were wide variations in skin color across individuals; however, when these individuals were aggregated into groups of white, mestizo and black, the color differences and the self-reported races were statistically significant. For example, a person with a very light skin color might know that he or she is truly of mixed race, and would report himself or herself as such. When self-reported mestizos were then taken as a group, they would be *on average* of intermediate skin color, and the *averages* for skin color and the self-reported races were statistically significant.
4. If one knew that *a person* was of European or Afro ancestry, one could make a reliable prediction of the skin color, but not the other way around (because light or dark skin color might reflect the admixture of a mestizo).

6. <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/race/>. Consulted in June, 2017,

7. “Cuba: Exploring the History of Admixture, and the Genetic Basis of Pigmentation Using Autosomal and Uniparental Markers,” by Beatriz Macheco Turuel and fifteen collaborators, July 2014, *PLoS Genetics*, Vol 10, pp. 1–13. See: <http://journals.plos.org/plosgenetics/article?id=10.1371/journal.pgen.1004488> (Consulted in June 2017).

5. The average European, African and Native American ancestry in those self-reporting to be 'blanco' were 86%, 6.7% and 7.8%; in those reporting to be 'mestizo' 63.8%, 25% and 10.7%; and in those self-reporting to be 'negro' 29%, 65% and 5.5%.
6. The maternal mitochondrial analysis showed 38.8% having African ancestry; 34.5% having Native American ancestry; and only 26.7% having European ancestry. In other words, the ancestral "Eves" of the female populations originated mainly among African and Native American ancestors, not among the European ancestors. This is not surprising given that most European migrants were males.
7. The paternal Y chromosome analysis showed 81.8% European ancestry and only 17.7% African ancestry. Native American ancestry was almost zero, and was actually traced to only two individuals!
8. Not surprisingly, the highest Native American ancestry of the maternal mitochondrial analysis was found in Holguín province, where Banes (Batista's birthplace) is located. The Castros also come from this region but have close ties to Spain, at least on the paternal side of the family.

It should be noted at this juncture that Batista never claimed to be white (he claimed to be "Cuban") and most Cubans are of mixed blood; that he was not related to recent immigrants from Spain or any other European country; that he preferred to be called Indio by his friends, an assertion that made sense since he came from Banes; that his skin was of mixed complexion; that his contemporaries (including scholars such as Portell Vilá) considered him of mixed blood; and to repeat, that even if he had claimed to be white, most whites in Cuba are of mixed blood, unless their ancestors had lived in Cuba only for a short

time. Greater details about these arguments were presented as an appendix in the original paper.

LEFT, CENTER, RIGHT, AND... RACISM IS NON-EXISTENT

We are now going to present the views of three distinguished internationally known scholars who might best be described, in political terms, as holding left, center, and right political views. We will concentrate on three books that they wrote in the 1970s and 1980s. Surprisingly, while acknowledging that race was an issue in Cuba, they concluded that it was not an important one, to the extent of either denying the existence of racism, or denying that racism was a major problem. The three authors are Jorge Domínguez, Hugh Thomas and Herminio Portell Vilá. The inclusion of Professor Domínguez in this section may surprise some readers, but it turns out that the strongest denials of racism in Cuba come from him. Apparently, many people have forgotten his work—or even worse, have not bothered to challenge his views.

We then begin with Domínguez' impressive political work on Cuba, his book *Cuba: Order and Revolution*.⁸ There is no mention of Batista's race in this book, although it is certainly possible that he has written about it in his many other books and articles. However, it is quite clear that he believed in the concept of race and that he ties it up to genetic factors. The relevant discussion appears on pages 516–7, where he reports on the height of children at various ages (6.5, 10.5 and 13.5 years of age) and at far different periods of time, 1919 and 1963. The data is not reported here. Domínguez points out that the heights of children increased for all ages and races, but that in this survey (and in a separate survey) blacks were taller than whites and that, except for one entry, mulattos were at an intermediate level. Then he states: "Because Cuban blacks were poorer than Cuban whites, the fact that they were consistently taller must be attributed to genetic, not environmental, factors." (p. 517). Far more surprising is Domínguez' perceptions about racism, which are truly extraordinary: "While there was *little race dis-*

8. Domínguez, Jorge. 1978. *Cuba: Order and Revolution*. The Belknap Press of Harvard University.

crimination in practice in Cuba either before or after the revolution, a modest amount of overt racism nevertheless continued to crop up” pp. 483–4, emphasis added). Citing a medical journal article, Domínguez made the point that in the 1950s, only one of the first two hundred psychiatric cases treated at Havana’s children hospital was diagnosed as having resulted from racial attitudes (p. 484).

Domínguez’ book paints a troubling vision of Cuban political history, both before and after the revolution. Practically all politicians were corrupt, changed party affiliations based on personal convenience, their professed ideological commitments amounted to nothing, the Americans imposed their will forcefully on them, and the Cuban population, even mulattos and blacks, accepted a measure of their inferiority to whites, etc. The list goes on for more than 500 pages. He accepted that some progress was made in Cuba on the economic front, but that progress had certainly nothing to do with politics or with the American companies that exploited economic conditions in the island. It should be noted that if Batista had been presented by Domínguez as a mixed race dictator, then the oppression that Cuba endured during the three Batista regimes (strongman in the 1930s, freely elected president in the 1940s, and dictator in the 1950s) would have been directed or exerted by a non-white person, not just against whites, but also against other mulattos and blacks.

We now move to the views of Hugh Thomas, who wrote a masterpiece on Cuba entitled *Cuba: The Pursuit of Freedom*,⁹ even his title is uplifting, since it gives Cubans a positive motivation behind their political mistakes. In reference to Batista’s race, Thomas states that “Both Batista’s parents appear to have been mulatto and one of them may have had some Indian Blood” (p. 636), providing a source which in fact does not document Batista’s race. Later, in the same page, Thomas argues that in his early youth Batista was known as the *mulato lindo*, an assertion that can be found in several sources. One page later

Thomas states that “With his Indian blood, [Batista] was almost red in complexion, with great personal charms.” It is clear that Thomas presents Batista within a positive intellectual framework throughout most of his work. Thomas even quotes a *New York Times* correspondent stating that Batista had a mind “which moves like lightning. He smiles readily and often, gives his complete attention to the person addressing him... he seemed plausible in the superlative degree...” (p. 637). Thomas’s story is that Batista outmaneuvered not only his Cuban political competitors in the 1930s, but also that he outmaneuvered the American diplomats who wanted to control Cuba. Batista appears in his work (at least during the 1930s and 1940s) as a brilliant strategist who used different political factions for his own ends. Batista manipulated the Americans, the Mexicans, and even the members of the communist party—the latter even during his dictatorship in the 1950s.

Thomas does not linger to discuss a tie between Batista’s race and his political performance, but he does not denigrate him for being a man of mixed race. With regard to racial prejudice, Thomas’ opinion is not much different from that of Domínguez’s: “That racial prejudice in old Cuba was not overwhelming is suggested by the fact that Castro never mentioned the matter in any of his speeches or programmes before the revolution. To read *History will absolve me* would suggest that Castro was addressing a racially homogeneous nation” (p. 1121). This argument is weak, for Castro could have been a racist himself! However, Thomas cites some interesting statistics (p.1119) that are worth repeating. In 1943 there were 560 black or mulatto lawyers, a large number in comparison with the three or four in 1899–1907; 434 [medical] doctors were black or mulatto, a fifth of the total in the country. There were also 3,500 black or mulatto teachers, compared with about 16,000 white teachers. Blacks were well represented among musicians, painters and others involved in the arts. And the list of black accomplishments goes on.

9. Thomas, Hugh. 1971. *Cuba: The Pursuit of Freedom*. Harper & Row.

The third and last scholar that we will take up in this section is Herminio Portell Vilá, who published his *Nueva Historia de la República de Cuba*¹⁰ in the United States at the age of 85. He was internationally known, having taught history in Cuba, Peru and the United States; he held highly prestigious posts in the United States, including at Yale University, and published 30 books before he passed away at the age of 91. His importance for us is that he knew *personally* all the major political players in modern Cuban history, and actually had to face exile three times. His last work demonstrated that he hated Batista, yet his condemnation of politicians was not as broad as that given by Domínguez, although he blamed almost everyone for Batista's rise to power. He recognized the injurious meddling of the United States in Cuban politics. To him, Batista was, above all else, a morally despicable character, but not a fool. Portell Vilá recognized that Batista was not only the youngest man freely elected president of the Cuban Republic, but he made the point that he was the *only* Cuban president of mixed race. He gives Batista credit for his intelligence and even his ability to acquire wisdom from others. Portell Vilá also emphasized that Batista was on good terms with communist leaders, not only in the late 1930s and in the 1940s (when Batista ran under the banner of the Coalición Socialista Democrática), but even in the 1950s—giving them protection and continuing the payments for government jobs that they did not perform. Surprisingly, when it comes to racism, Portell Vilá's opinions are similar to those of Domínguez and Thomas. Referring to the 1940s, he could state: "No había distingos raciales en cuanto a los cargos de elección popular, empleos gubernamentales, el trabajo industrial y rural, todos los niveles de educación, las fuerzas armadas y los deportes. El prejuicio racial todavía se man-

tenía en los 'clubs' sociales, pero aun en ellos había casos bien conocidos de asociados que 'pasaban por blancos'" (p. 530). Cuba's racial situation had improved so much by the 1950s that Gastón Baquero, a leading black intellectual and Batista supporter, became editor-in-chief of the *Diario de la Marina*, which was the most conservative and most influential newspaper in Cuba. And the black and mixed race population had once again one of their own as leader of the Cuban Republic; namely, Fulgencio Batista.

RACISM CHARGES AIMED AT A GENERAL AUDIENCE

Perceptions about Cuban racial conflicts, both before and after the revolution, have changed dramatically in the Twenty First Century. The same is true with regard to references to Batista's race, where his mixed race status is either ignored or at the very least questioned as an objective fact. We give five examples. EcuRed, which is the official information web of the Cuban government, fails to disclose that Batista was a man of mixed race—even though it mentions his humble origins and has a nice picture of him.¹¹ Neither the *Encyclopedia Americana* on line,¹² nor the *Encyclopedia Britannica*¹³ mention Batista's race. *Cuba: A Global Studies Handbook*,¹⁴ has a short biography of Batista which does not mention his race at all (pp.401–402). *The Encyclopedia of Cuba*¹⁵ states that "[Batista's] racial and ethnic origins are subject to debate. His friends referred to him as *el indio*, while his enemies called him *el negro*... In addition to Amerindian and Afro-Cuban origins, others *speculated* that Batista was of Chinese, Mexican or Greek background" (p. 138, *emphasis added*). These are five sources that one would expect to be consulted and searched by young college students.

10. Portell Vilá, Herminio. 1986. *Nueva Historia de la República de Cuba*. La Moderna Poesía, Miami, FL.

11. See https://www.ecured.cu/Fulgencio_Batista Consulted in June, 2017

12. <http://libezproxy.broward.org/login?url=http://go.grolier.com/> Enter the name Batista and then choose the first entry on Fulgencio Batista. Consulted in June, 2017.

13. <https://www.britannica.com/search?query=Fulgencio%20Batista> Consulted in June, 2017.

14. Henken, Ted. 2008. *Cuba: A Global Studies Handbook*. ABC CLIO, Santa Barbara, CA.

15. The full title is *The Encyclopedia of Cuba: people, history, culture*, Vol. 2. 2003. Greenwood Press.

We are now going to concentrate on one recent work on Cuba, previously mentioned: *Cuba: A Global Studies Handbook*. We want to compare how Batista is treated relative to another well known Cuban figure, Nicolás Guillén [Batista] (no relation to Fulgencio Batista), the famous Cuban poet who was born one year after Batista's birth and outlived him by about 15 years. It is said in the *Handbook* that Guillén was a mulatto writer and that his extensive work spanned the republican and revolutionary eras; that he wrote about social protest and most important about *poesía negrista*. Guillén is highly praised for his contributions to the formation of a black consciousness in Cuba. The book explicitly states that Batista was a strong supporter of the United States, but never mentions that Guillén received the Stalin Peace Prize in 1954, which the EcuRed web site makes sure to rename the *Premio Internacional Lenin de la Paz* (Stalin has a bad reputation even in communist countries).

But there is far, far more that has been left out. Batista came not just from humble origins, but from dirt poor farm workers, whereas Guillén came from one of the wealthiest mulatto families in Cuba, and he belonged to the elite classes, for his father was a Cuban Senator. Batista's jobs when he was young were among the lowest of the low (see Oltuski's characterization at the start of this paper) whereas the young Guillén worked as editor of one highly respected newspaper in Camagüey. Guillén had a first rate education, while Batista was a self-made man, who achieved a significant literary grace in his writings, which is quite apparent in his private correspondence.¹⁶

We also learn in the *Handbook* that racism in Cuba was the norm rather than the exception. The following quote is descriptive: "[American ideology that created an exclusively white U.S. organized police force and rural guard at the beginning of the Twenti-

eth Century] and other common exclusions based on race led some Afro-Cuban leaders to begin organizing defensive movements around their common racial identity. However, the mobilization of groups around racial identity or ideology was criticized and repressed as itself a racist act. In 1910 the Cuban Congress approved the Morúa Amendment that outlawed political parties based on race, directly leading to the 1912 massacre of the Independent Party of Color (PIC). This 'nationwide extermination of Blacks of quasi-genocidal proportions' had the long-term effect of eliminating the leadership of Cuba's Afro-Cuban community, leading to a generation of black underrepresentation in politics and systematic occupational discrimination [reference]. As a result, discrimination against Afro-Cubans as second-class citizens during the first half of the twentieth century was the norm"... (p.294).

If that was true, the author of the *Handbook* needs to explain how Batista, a mixed race man of extremely humble background, became freely elected president of the Republic in 1940; or far more curiously, how Guillén's father managed to be a Senator¹⁷ and Guillén himself got to receive an exquisite education years after the so-called massacre. The Morúa Amendment was the work of Martín Morúa Delgado, who was an Afro-Cuban revolutionary (whose own mother was an ex-slave) and head of the Cuban Senate after independence from Spain. Furthermore, the amendment was supported by Juan Gualberto Gómez, another Afro-Cuban revolutionary leader and member of the Cuban Congress. Without any doubts, Gómez was the greatest Afro-Cuban intellectual of the past century. It must be *accidental* that the author of the *Handbook* has no biography about him in the section for "Significant People, Places and Events," and there is no mention of him in the Index.

16. Letter from Fulgencio Batista to Enrique Pizzi de Porras, March 24, 1967; private collection of Carmen Pizzi Santurio. It appears on p. 279 of the book Argote-Freyre, Frank. 2006. *Fulgencio Batista: The Making of the Dictator*. Rutgers University Press. The author of this book is not a sycophant.

17. A Senator who failed to participate in the discussion and vote on the Morúa Amendment!

RACISM CHARGES FROM A DISTINGUISHED SCHOLAR

If there is one person who deserves the credit (or blame) for changing the narrative about Batista's race, and widespread racial discrimination in Cuba, it is Professor Alejandro de la Fuente, whose book entitled *A Nation for All: Race, Inequality and Politics in Twentieth Century Cuba*, has been universally praised.¹⁸ De la Fuente has secured his reputation because of his detailed scholarship and rhetorical skills. He made his research objective quite clear in his book's "Introduction," noting that one of the main goals of his book was "to incorporate the study of 'race' and of social inequality in the general question of national formation and the evolution of Cuban society during the postcolonial period" (p.15). De la Fuente refers to Batista's 'race' on several occasions, some of which will be repeated here:

1. "As in 1933, rumors circulated [after the Castro revolution] presenting blacks as the main beneficiaries and supporters of the fallen dictator—in this case Fulgencio Batista (1952–58), himself a mestizo, *according to the white elite*" (p.17, *emphasis added*).
2. [Writing about the 1933 sergeants' revolt]: "The U.S. consul in the city [of Matanzas] commented that some of them could 'hardly read and write' and added that eight of them were 'negroes.' The new chief of the rural guard in the province was also black. Batista, *himself of dubious whiteness*, had several black soldiers in his personal escort, providing Afro-Cubans with a growing visibility within the army" (p. 134, *emphasis added*).
3. "... although Batista's 'race' was always a contested issue..." (p.136). The single quotes are de la Fuente's.
4. [After Batista gained "strongman" status in the 1930s] "To legitimize Batista, it was thus necessary not only to emphasize his military and political abilities but also to modify his racial background... Batista's racial *transformation* was

achieved by discovering some 'indigenous' roots in his origin... indeed his close friends later referred to him as 'el indio'...The need to *construct* Batista's race was candidly summarized by the US military attaché in Havana... 'I am very much inclined now to believe that Batista is either of Chilean-Indian extraction or of Chilean-Mexican extraction... [these mixtures] are apt to be more courageous, more sagacious and more crafty than the mixed negro-Chinese-Cuban'" (p. 208, *emphasis added*).

The reader should note how carefully the phrasing used by de la Fuente skirts with ambiguity. The reason appears to be that if he were to assert that Batista was of mixed race (which seems the blatant truth), then de la Fuente would have to give Batista credit for being the first freely elected Cuban president of mixed race, and *that* could not only explain Batista's policies in favor of the poor during his presidency in the 1940s, but also unravel many of de la Fuente's arguments. Let us note, too, that de la Fuente is not reluctant to express the race of Nicolás Guillén Batista. De la Fuente states on page 119: "Nicolás Guillén, the great mulatto poet and writer, recounted that in the 1920s he had tried to obtain a 'modest position' [note the single quotes] in the offices of a railroad company in Camagüey with no success: 'That company has many black employees, but only in the mechanical shops.'" De la Fuente has no problem asserting that Guillén Batista was a mulatto, but Batista Zaldívar's race was somehow impossible to determine! De la Fuente also forgets to mention that Guillén Batista was the son of a Senator, and that the most profitable occupation in Cuba was politics [as he asserts on p. 129 of his book].

Let's move on to de la Fuente's views on racism in Cuba. De la Fuente appears to believe that practically all Cubans in power (obviously not including Senator Guillén Urra) were racists, a belief that will be challenged because de la Fuente's arguments do not meet the relevant facts and evidence. Also, this author introduces a conceptual criticism; namely, that

18. De la Fuente, Alejandro. 2001. *A Nation for All: Race, Inequality and Politics in Twentieth Century Cuba*. The University of North Carolina Press.

no woman is half-pregnant. Let's now explain how these two criticisms apply to de la Fuente's work, using a fuller elaboration of point above: "White resistance achieved at least two concrete results. The leadership of the army remained white—although Batista's 'race' was always *a contested issue*—and Afro-Cubans' representation in the armed forces and the police actually declined slightly during the 1930s... Black journalist Manuel Cuéllar Vizcaíno was right when he stated that under Batista the army had 'whitened' and that black officers were *in many cases* barred from social events in the army's club... Some blacks, such as Generals Hernández Nardo and Gregorio Querejeta, reached positions of command at the national level, but the control of the army and the police remained in white hands" (p. 136, *emphasis added*).

The above quote summarizes all that is wrong with de la Fuente's book. Assume that the people in the army, excluding Batista, were racists. Well, if Batista was himself black, or at least a man of mixed race, and he was the head of the army, then the head honcho was a colored man and the leadership of the army *did not remain white*. This is why de la Fuente may be ambiguous about Batista's race in his work. If he grants that Batista was of mixed ancestry, de la Fuente's argument is invalid; and if he says that Batista was white, he would be ridiculed. There are also two instances of the half-pregnant argument. One is to note that two *black* people are named generals with power at the national level—yet somehow the army or at least the armed forces seems racist! The other one is that black officers were *in many cases* (but not all cases!) barred from social events. Observe, too, that de la Fuente supports his position by quoting *one* person; would there be others who disagreed? This type of argument is found all over his book: reporting on people who agree with de la Fuente, regardless of the available evidence, or the commentators' expertise on such matters, or alternative opinions.

In the longer version of this paper, there is a long discussion about a table that is used on p. 116 of the

book, but that cannot be reproduced here for reasons of limited space. The general criticism of that table is that one cannot judge racism by whether or not the proportion of blacks in any one occupation is similar to the proportion of blacks in the labor force—that is ignoring factors such as history, educational attainment, preferences, individual abilities, political pressures, and many other factors. If that were not true, then Cuba would be the most anti-machismo society in the world! Why? Because Louis A. Perez, Jr., informed his readers¹⁹ that "in a 1952 occupational survey, women accounted for more than 55 percent of professional and technical occupations. They were most strongly represented in the teaching profession, where women numbered 34,769: 55 percent of university teachers, 90 percent of secondary instructors, and 84 percent of primary school teachers" (p. 232). Crude measures of discrimination should have no part in our perceptions of what took place in Cuba: Concentrating on individual sectors can lead to distortions about the situation for *all blacks and/or all women*. While de la Fuente deserves much credit for finding and reporting about many sources of information that had been neglected, it needs to be noted that his conclusions are contrary to those reached by Domínguez, Thomas and Portell Vilá, and if he wants to defeat their arguments, he has first to acknowledge that these serious scholars reached very different conclusions, and then he has to demonstrate *why* they were wrong. The same applies to others who want to present pre-revolutionary Cuba as a racist society.

RACISM IN CUBA AND IN THE UNITED STATES

Cuba should be favorably compared to the United States in the first half of the Twentieth Century. Let's consider President Wilson's second election, when he won 277 electoral college votes and the Republicans candidate won 254 votes. If we count only the so-called Deep South states, he got there 61 electoral college votes, where blacks were even prohibited by law from registering to vote in Democratic primaries; and if we add the border states, but not Texas,

19. Perez Jr., Louis A. 2006. *Cuba: Between Reform and Revolution*. Oxford University Press.

he then got 94 votes where the blacks were also prohibited by law from registering to vote in Democratic primaries. Statistics clearly show that blacks were totally disenfranchised in the South of the United States; in fact, they were *spectacularly* disenfranchised from voting! The United States, for many years, depended on a system of apartheid to determine the outcome of its national elections. One should add that the Republicans in the South were the political “negroes” of the South. In Florida, from 1935 to 1946 there were zero Republican senators and zero Republican House members in the state’s legislature. Similar statements could be made for all other southern states, and this history needs to be known among Cuban-American scholars.

In the 1940s, Cuba had black generals, and Cuban blacks had produced major contributions to culture, including black painters, musicians and literary figures (Guillén Batista comes in as a handy reminder). The most conservative newspaper, *El Diario de la Marina*, had a black editor (Gustavo Urrutia) from the late 1920s to the 1930s, even before Gastón Baquero became a general editor in the 1950s. Cuban sports were integrated, just the same way that public schools were integrated. Rita Montaner, a black singer, was one of the established stars of Cuban entertainment, and Celia Cruz (who had studied at Havana’s conservatory of music) began then her meteoric musical career.

The argument in support that Cuba was a racist society is based on two main issues. First, and most recent, was the existence of racial discrimination within white social clubs. Yet this argument has to be placed in a historical context: How many American social clubs were integrated, not just in the South, but everywhere in the United States prior to the Civil Rights legislation of the 1960s? How many such clubs were integrated in Colombia, Mexico and Argentina before the 1950s? Second, it is based on the 1912 war against the members of the Partido Independiente de Color (PIC), which tried to defend the rights of Cuban blacks in the new republic. That, too, needs to be placed in historical context; namely, how many democratic countries in the world have allowed political parties based *on the race of its mem-*

bers? Would Cuba, even today, allow such a party? Cuba does not even allow independent parties of people of mixed races! Furthermore, the PIC had almost no support from the black Cuban social clubs, much less from the Cuban blacks who held political power in Cuba. Did Senator Guillén Urra, the father of Nicolas Guillén Batista, resign from the Senate as a result of the Morúa Amendment, which had been proposed by an extremely powerful black senator in Cuba? It is extremely significant that the 1912 war was led, in part, by Jose Martí’s son: did he not share his father’s values? If we really want to know about Cuban racism, let’s compare Cuba not just to other Latin American nations with high proportion of blacks, but also compare Cuba to all American states, for which we have ample data. This procedure will, in the opinion of this author, showcase Cuba in a favorable light.

CONCLUSIONS

It should be obvious to all that Cuban historiography would be different if Fulgencio Batista had had a dark skin. But what difference should that make, if his full story had been told? After all, Batista came from among the poorest of the poor, and he likely faced discrimination by those “white” Cubans who thought of themselves as representatives of European cultures, especially the Spanish culture. How did Batista, then, become the representative of the so-called white elites in Cuba? He was hated by the middle and upper classes. Yet he remained popular among the poor and working classes in Cuba. Fulgencio Batista was a malefactor and a villain, plus a corrupt man, responsible for the death of youthful friends, but all of that did not detract from his popularity—until a reign of terror was unleashed against his regime. Did the end justify the means, both for him and for his opponents?

The truth of the matter is, looking back at the history of Europe in the first half of the Twentieth Century, that most Cubans were men and women of mixed blood, and European culture itself (not a “unifying” force) represented a multitude of values that led to two great wars. This author suspects that Cubans, in the first half of the Twentieth Century, were far more culturally unified than the French, the Spanish,

the Germans, the Italians, etc. Yet both Cubans in Cuba, and Europeans throughout the world, fought among themselves, and they fought bitterly. Let us also recall that Haiti, made up entirely of blacks, invaded and massacred their mixed race brothers in the Dominican Republic more than once in the Nineteenth Century. Racial victims can be of any race. Race and racial prejudice is used to justify actions, but is racial hatred at the root of Cuban, or European, or even world political and social problems, as current scholars want us to believe?

This author has tried to demonstrate that race is not a social construct, and that science today has a much

better understanding of race than in the past. Many scholars in the past felt that racial conflicts in Cuba were not, let us say, highly divisive. This author agrees with their assessment, especially when the arguments are placed in historical context. Yet, we must all take seriously what scholars produce as history today, especially when modern history is so contradictory of what previous historians were telling us. The motivation behind this paper is to make readers aware that history is being rewritten in front of our very eyes... and that we have an obligation to dispute what seems to us false.