INTRODUCTION

Rethinking the Paradigms of National Formation

Cuban narratives of national liberation long ago assumed discernible forms of received wisdom, something of a settled epistemology akin to an article of faith: those foundational chronicles to which successive generations of historians are heir, into which they are more or less socialized, and to which they are mostly disposed to accede. The liberation narratives appear credible, certainly, as a matter of custom and convention, told and retold, remembered and recounted, and in the aggregate have served as stories deployed to inform the premise of *lo cubano*.

Liberation narratives are especially susceptible to discursive forms of conceit, of course. They are in part myths, at times swooning to heights of lore and legend—a people infatuated with the "glorious legends" of their past, Santiago Rey offers—produced by historical actors at the time, for practical reasons, and reproduced by historians thereafter, often for reasons no less practical.[1] The myths possess an internal logic of their own, as indeed myths often do, expanding fully into belief systems, mostly because they idealize those attributes that a people most like about themselves. Achievements to commemorate, virtues to emulate, values to live up to: all fundamental to the foundation myths. "La historia como identidad," pronounced Miguel Barnet.2 What is there not to like?

It could hardly be otherwise, of course: the remembrance of heroic sacrifice and Homeric struggle, noble leaders and notable deeds. No moral ambiguity here. The indignation of an aroused people driven to take history into their own hands was a

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matter of collective resolve, coming together in common purpose fully persuaded of the righteousness of their claim to a nation of their own: women and men, young and old, black and white, Cubans of means and of modest origins alike—together—over successive generations, giving themselves unconditionally to the idea of Cuba Libre as a means of being, belonging, and becoming. Sublime leaders, many of whom perished in the process, were lifted aloft in the swell of apotheosis, thereupon transformed into martyrs, models, and metaphors: Carlos Manuel de Céspedes, Ignacio Agramonte, José Martí, Mariana Grajales, and Antonio Maceo, among many others—"magnificent examples of virtue for Cuban youth to imitate," exulted Matías Duque.[3] They gave meaning to *lo cubano*. They fixed the standard of how Cubans should live and set the purpose for which Cubans should die. Invitation to martyrdom in exchange for the prospects of everlasting life. "To die for the *patria* is to live forever," promises the Cuban national anthem.

This is seductive stuff, possessed of an appeal often difficult to resist. The historiography of the nineteenth century is rich with the memorialization of liberation as a collective experience from which the normative determinants of nationality have assumed meaning. The narratives tend to hew closely to the proposition of history as a source of resilience and a means of redemption, a past to look up to and live for, at once didactic and instrumental, history as a metaphysics worthy of the protagonists for whom dedication to the idea of the sovereign nation was, in the words of writer Lisandro Otero, "associated with moral duty."[4] The master narrative of the nineteenth-century liberation project closes in on itself and allows little possibility for alternative outcomes, tending instead to subordinate the contingencies of history to the privilege of hindsight.

The heroic narratives of national liberation do in fact bear a measure of verisimilitude, of course. How true the historic chronicles may be—or not—is often less important than the role they play. Narratives endowed with instrumental purpose are used to explain the origins of the nation and to serve the needs of the people who deploy them. To understand the nineteenth-century wars of liberation, historian Jorge Ibarra explained as his purpose for writing *Historia de Cuba* (1971), implied the need "to call attention to the continuity of this historical process with the socialist revolution."[5] To serve notice: the revolution had a history.

At least as important as the truths included and remembered, however, are the truths excluded and forgotten, denied entrée into the foundational narratives of the nation, often feared as a threat of destabilizing the presumption of clarity upon which the normative determinants of nationality rest: a people—perhaps properly so—disinclined to admit moral ambiguity into the meaning of their past. The silences,

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anthropologist Michel-Rolph Trouillot wrote in a different context, in those historiographies are "heavily guided by national—if not always nationalist—interests."[6]

The liberation project spanned much of the nineteenth century, pursued principally in the form of thwarted conspiracies and short-lived uprisings, as failed filibustering expeditions and ill-planned annexationist plots, and as a successions of wars: the Ten Years' War (1868–78), the Little War (1879–80), and the War for Independence (1895–98). Years during which enmities deepened and settled into sharply defined markers of fixed estrangement: ill will between the colony and the metropolis, among social classes and within the privileged classes, between Cubans and Spaniards, among Cubans themselves, between blacks and whites. All in all, cultural distinctions, ethnic divisions, and racial differences often found expression in the form of spasms of violence and thereupon settled into a politics of virulent intensity.

The nineteenth century was a time of visceral animus, of hate extending outward and inward into the sensibility of a people at war among themselves. Some lived with the fear of loss and displacement; others lived with the fact of loss and displacement. Living daily life in close proximity with one another, close enough for them to understand they were the source of each other's fears—and the object of each other's hatreds. Circumstances that could not but act to distill hatred into a raw force for political change—or not—animosities taking deep root over the span of nearly one hundred years, burnished deeply into the temperament of a people through the violence of chattel slavery, rebellion and repression, resistance and subjugation. An arrangement of checks and balances of enmities—in its own right—served fully as a system of governance to hold in place a colonial regime long past its time.

The expansion in the population of people of color—both enslaved Africans and free people of African descent—as a consequence of sugar production after Saint-Domingue changed everything. Census data for 1792 indicate the presence of an estimated 85,000 enslaved Africans and 54,000 free people of color. This population more than doubled to 199,000 and 114,000 respectively by 1817, and doubled again to 436,000 and 153,000 in 1841.[7] In no other Spanish colony was the local economy so fully dependent on the labor of enslaved people. In no other Spanish colony did enslaved Africans constitute so large a part of the population. In no other Spanish colony did the total African-descended population expand to constitute a majority.[8]

The presence of a vast population of enslaved people upon whom the producing classes depended but from whom they also needed protection acted relentlessly to shape much of the history that would follow. The loyalty of the Ever-Faithful Isle often had less to do with heartfelt fealty than with pragmatic expedience. Colonialism was an

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arrangement of security and stability, of course, but also was a strategy to defend the racial hierarchies upon which chattel slavery and the exercise of white privilege depended. To live with an interior knowledge of the iniquity of chattel slavery, however, with and among vast numbers of African-descended people, was also to live with the specter of retributive justice. "The whites of the island of Cuba," Félix Varela warned as early as 1822, during the restoration of the liberal 1812 Constitution in Spain, "do not cease to congratulate themselves for having overturned the old despotism and having recovered the sacred rights of free men. And do they expect that the natives of Africa will remain passive spectators to these emotions? Their rage and despair will oblige them to choose between liberty and death."[9] Planter José Luis Alfonso did not fail to discern ominous portents in the slave uprisings of the 1840s. "Are we to be surprised that enslaved men rose up to fight for their liberty?" Alfonso asked rhetorically. "With each passing day we discern greater determination among them, with a deepening tendency to rebel and claim their rights through force."[10]

To interrogate anew the experience of liberation implies the need to situate the matter of race relations at the center of the colonial reckoning in the nineteenth century as context for almost everything else. The fear of the expanding presence of people of color—free and enslaved—reached deeply into the cosmology of white, a presence to keep at bay and hold in check, a colonial status quo sustained by fear, a pervasive disquiet that settled into a condition of daily life during most of the nineteenth century. Time enough for fear to acquire a proper history, kept alive as a result of recurring acts of rebellion and allegations of conspiracies, thereupon to confirm the worst fears of a fearful people. A restive criollo patriciate and an overbearing *peninsular* officialdom, representatives of the producing classes, including planters, manufacturers, merchants, and industrialists, all, in sum, whose well-being was implicated in sugar and slavery, lived with fear: fear of the abolition of slavery, of the emancipation of the enslaved, of the rebellion of the enslaved, of race war, of black suffrage, and inevitably a fear that extended into a dread of Cuban independence—for the same reason.[11] Political change seemed almost always to implicate populations of color, almost always perceived as a threat to prevailing racial order—that is, almost always everything. There was perhaps no more effective means through which to uphold the logic of colonialism than the specter of social dissolution attending independence. Early in the nineteenth century—and long thereafter—among the beneficiaries of an enduring status quo, the proposition of sovereignty became synonymous with black ascendancy.

To address the colonial reckoning of the nineteenth century implies the need to acknowledge ambiguity and complexity in the process of liberation, to work through

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contradictions and contingencies, to address anomalies that were often as incompatible as they were incongruent. The *independentista* project spanned the lifetime of three successive generations over the course of the nineteenth century, circumstances that could not but allow for the entrée of disparate voices and divergent visions, changing with the times as the times changed, changing too as an ever-expanding separatist coalition changed. The idea of Free Cuba evolved over the course of time, often as a matter of pragmatic adaptation, haltingly, and advancing in fits and starts, expanding—or contracting—to accommodate competing ideological formulations and reconcile conflicting strategies of liberation, almost always as practiced efforts to cobble together a political consensus into an executable military plan of action. The liberation purpose was transacted by way of opportunistic alliances and within principled coalitions, among the well-meaning and the mischievous, as hastily improvised uprisings and well-prepared plots.

Cuba Libre meant different things to different people, differences that often coexisted incongruously and unresolved within an ever-changing paradigm of national liberation. For the time being—at the time—as a matter of practical necessity over the short run, it was enough that something of a consensus formed around the necessity to obtain the independence of Cuba from Spain, a unanimity of purpose and unity of interests to which almost all other differences were purposely subordinated.

But the differences persisted, and they accumulated: differences over competing visions of nation and contested meanings of nationality, indeed often over the very plausibility of the proposition of Free Cuba. Separation from Spain did not always mean sovereignty for Cuba. Political fault lines etched deeply across the physiognomy of the *criollidad*, fissures often as deep as they were wide, among advocates for home self-rule within the colonial system, supporters of annexation to the United States, and proponents of national sovereignty, between Cubans on the island and Cubans in the emigration, between—as Carlos Loveira would memorialize—the *generales y doctores*.

But it was more complicated still. In fact, vast numbers of Cubans remained loyal to *la madre patria* to render vital service to Spain, criollos Melchor Loret de Mola would later characterize as "the type of Hispanicized Cuban" (*el tipo del cubano españolizado*), Cubans whose needs accommodated easily to the benefits of colonialism.[12] The collaboration of Cubans with the colonial regime was an essential facet of Spanish governance, to confer political legitimacy in times of peace and enhance military capacity during times of war. During the final decades of the nineteenth century, Cubans of means and education enrolled in the leadership of the Autonomist Party to seek home-rule/self-government authority within the framework of the colonial system, and especially to navigate between the known constraints of colonialism and the unknown consequences of independence. Other Cubans served the colonial

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government with arms, through service in the *milicias*, recruited by Spain as a way to share the responsibility for stability, to render support in the maintenance of internal security, to contain slave rebellion and recapture escaped slaves, to defend the island against external filibustering expeditions and combat internal separatist uprisings. Service as officers in the *milicias* offered the well-to-do young men of creole families access to official positions of authority, perhaps too a pathway to upward mobility within colonial officialdom. Many thousands of Cubans of color similarly filled the ranks of the *batallones de pardos y morenos*, also as a matter of career options and a means of livelihood in an environment of otherwise limited opportunities.[13]

Nowhere perhaps did Cubans render greater service in defense of Spanish colonial sovereignty than in the role of paramilitary auxiliary forces known variously as guerrillas, *guerrilleros*, and *contra-guerrillas*, organized to assist *peninsular* army units in the suppression of the colonial insurgencies between 1868 and 1898. The view of the guerrilla in the service of a counterrevolutionary project appears as an anomaly, most assuredly, for in the modern imagination the proposition of guerrilla/guerrilla warfare serves to denote a method of war associated most commonly with armed resistance, with the weak against the strong, with wars of national liberation. Certainly the weight of the historiography of the nineteenth-century wars of independence tends to favor descriptions of the guerrilla and guerrilla warfare as the method of war waged by the Cubans against the Spanish government.

No doubt a correct modern description of the operational facets of the Cuban way of war. But in Cuba—at the time—and on both sides, *guerrilla* meant something very different. The word *guerrilla* derived its original sensibility from the campaign of irregular—"small war"—paramilitary operations sustained by Spanish armed resistance against the occupation of Spain by the Grande Armée of Napoleon. The Spanish resistance fighters performed heroically in collaboration with the Duke of Wellington during the Peninsular War in what would become known as Spain's war of independence (1808–14). All due credit owed to the guerrillas, reported British Captain T. Sydenham:

> [The Spanish guerrillas] obliged the French to fortify themselves in every village and town in the country; they harassed the parties who were through the provinces either to subsist themselves, or to procure supplies from the enemy's magazines. . . . They intercepted convoys of provisions and stores; they rendered the communications of the enemy very difficult and hazardous, and often cut them off for weeks together; and finally, they assisted in keeping alive the spirit of resistance against the invaders.[14]

The guerrillas in Spain had acquitted themselves honorably. They had redeemed the nation, and henceforth the persona of the guerrilla was invoked with respect and

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reverence. It was not a designation Spain would bestow upon the Cuban *insurrectos*, who were variously characterized as outlaws, traitors, criminals, and arsonists—but never as guerrillas. Guerrillas in Cuba were the *nativos de la isla*, as the Spanish were wont to say, practiced in the ways of paramilitary warfare, in this instance, in the methods of counterinsurgency—in the contemporary vernacular—in defense of Spanish colonial rule. Both Spanish authorities and Cuban *insurrectos* understood guerrillas to be Cubans in the service of Spain.

Spanish army commanders in Cuba arrived early at an understanding of the character of warfare in the middle latitudes of the New World. This was not warfare between opposing armies engaged in set-piece battles. On the contrary, these were wars waged against unseen combatants supported by populations of visible noncombatants. The nineteenth-century insurgencies in Cuba foreshadowed the twentieth-century colonial wars of national liberation between the colonized and the colonizer, in settings where distinctions between combatants and noncombatants rarely revealed themselves with discernible clarity. The enemy in Cuba was everywhere, the Spanish army command understood—and acted accordingly.

Spain waged a new kind of war, given to adjustments of tactical methods and adaptation of strategic purpose—continually—against combatants and noncombatants alike, of course, but also to contend with an insufferable climate and an unfamiliar topography. The insurgencies of nineteenth-century Cuba suggest new dimensions to environmental history, to understand a European soldiery waging war in equatorial latitudes within a special kind of meteorology, enclosed within dense, luxuriant rain forests, with the sun constantly at a near-vertical position by noon, and the seasonal cycles of relentless torrential rains. Unbearable temperatures. Impenetrable jungles. Impassable marshlands. And mosquitoes. And disease. A combination that wreaked havoc on what had been among the mightiest mobilizations of European combat soldiers in the New World. No small truth was contained in the observation offered in 1873 by physician Félix de Echauz, chief of the Sanitation Corps of the Spanish army in Cuba, that “the principal enemy we face in Cuba is not the *insurrecto* but the climate.”[15]

Spain conducted ferocious wars in Cuba, deploying a different kind of violence, costly to the Cubans, of course. But also costly to Spanish soldiers. The results of the wars were ghastly. An estimated 200,000 women, men, and children perished between 1868 and 1878. Perhaps as many as 500,000 women and men—mostly Cuban civilians—lost their lives between 1895 and 1898. The estimates of death among Spanish soldiers were staggering. Perhaps as many as 150,000 dead between 1868 and 1878 and another 100,000 dead between 1895 and 1898—deaths due mostly to disease.

The colonial wars were waged principally between and within populations of shared cultural systems and similar moral tenacities, protracted affairs stretching

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into years, countless military operations mostly without consequences, wars fought with the settled conviction that victory—or perhaps better said, that defeat—had less to do with outcomes of battles than with the need to deplete the morale and weaken the resolve of the enemy. The type of conflict that often develops into something of a personal matter, thereupon sustained with deepening hatreds that often act to transform the conduct of war into campaigns of reprisal and revenge.

Peninsular army commanders understood the need for the assistance of *los nativos de la isla*. Many tens of thousands of Cubans, black and white, often including former *insurrectos* who defected to Spain (*presentados*), acclimated to and familiar with the interior habitat of the insurgency (*la manigua*), served variously as *prácticos* to guide Spanish military columns and as mobile cavalry units to carry the war to the *mambises*. *Los nativos* did indeed render important service. Some of the most significant losses suffered by the *mambises* were inflicted in operations conducted by guerrilla units. The Spanish assault against the encampment of San Lorenzo in 1874 where Carlos Manuel de Céspedes was killed was based on the intelligence provided by *presentado* Ramón Jacás serving as *práctico*.[16] In 1870 the guerrillas of Cinco Villas mounted the attack against General Antonio de Armas, who was captured and subsequently executed.[17] Operations that resulted in the capture of General Julio Sanguily in 1871 were directed by a unit of two hundred guerrillas.[18] General Augusto Arango was killed in guerrilla operations led by Lieutenant Ramón Recio—"*un mal cubano*," decried Vidal Morales y Morales.[19] Antonio Maceo fell mortally wounded at Punta Brava in battle with guerrilla forces under the command of Doroteo de Peral.

To examine the role of the Cuban guerrillas is to arrive at a fuller appreciation of Spanish capacities to sustain years of punishing losses, and this offers a far more nuanced understanding of the workings of Spanish colonialism and the success of Spanish military operations—success in this instance to mean the ability to forestall the always-looming prospects of defeat. It is perhaps impossible to understand the resilience of the Spanish army in the face of frightful losses of life without attention to the vital assistance rendered by Cubans on behalf of *peninsular* military operations.

To accommodate the presence of the guerrillas within the historiography of the nineteenth century also acts to complicate the liberation narratives and to problematize further the liberation process. The moral clarity so long a hallowed feature of the historiography of Cuba, in fact, does not correspond exactly to the varieties of the Cuban experience as lived. The heroic historical narratives have tended to efface the complexities of the profound social transformations in which not all Cubans were transformed equally. In fact, the wars for independence were also armed

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conflicts between Cubans, wars without quarter assuming the unforgiving intensities that so often accompany civil wars.

The first-person experiences as remembered and recorded by the *mambises*, that is, the protagonists themselves, have served historians well, mostly a combination of personal correspondence, memoirs, diaries, field journals, autobiographies, and reminiscences written by the men and women who committed to posterity a record of their presence, to insert themselves as party to and participants in the outcomes to which they contributed: an act of agency, in its own right, to claim the role of protagonist in their own history. To see the past through their eyes, in their own words, to see what they observed and to read what they wrote, even if encumbered with an imperfect and incomplete understanding of the forces acting to shape the course of events, is to be situated inside the experience of armed engagement. They often failed to appreciate the significance of what they saw or misrepresented the importance of what they observed. It bears remembering, too, that these texts are profoundly skewed, always favoring the voice of participants with the gift of letters: access to the past through the privilege of literacy, perhaps among the most inexorable filter of inequality.

Considered separately and apart, the first-person liberation chronicles seldom rise above realms of the anecdotal, as historians often caution, texts in the form of personal observations and individual experiences that may—or may not—have significance to matters beyond the gaze of the observer. In the aggregate, however, they are transformed into something else, into a body of evidence, to suggest the presence of patterns, perhaps to point to tendencies and draw attention to trends, to allow for the possibility of inference, always as a matter of a tentative construct, of course, through which to suggest the plausibility of a hypothesis.

In fact, however, the memory of participants has not always found a welcoming space within the normative provenance from which the heroic historical narratives have been assembled. There is something subversive about the honesty of the first-person memoir that has often inclined historians to mute the range of the *mambí* voice. On the matter of the guerrillas, the historiography is conspicuous for its silence, recalling Ernest Renan's adage that "the essence of a nation is that all individuals have many things in common, and also that they have forgotten many things."[20] It was not that the guerrillas were forgotten, however. They were made forgettable. The historiographical silences are especially noteworthy in light of the prominence given to the guerrillas in almost all the memoirs, reminiscences, and autobiographies of the *mambises* themselves, those first-person accounts that served to chronicle the character of the war and the characteristics of the combatants.

The guerrillas pass through Cuban historiography mostly in silence, a subject that rarely rises above the status of a footnote. The formidable and indeed prodigious

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history of the Ten Years' War by Ramiro Guerra y Sánchez, *Guerra de los Diez Años, 1868–1878* (1950), in every regard rich with detail in its reach and sweeping in its scope, offers but scant reference to the presence of the guerrillas.[21] The magisterial four-volume history by Herminio Portell Vilá, *Historia de Cuba en sus relaciones con los Estados Unidos y España* (1938–41), is all but silent on the matter of guerrillas, as is the prodigious scholarship of Emilio Roig de Leuchsenring, Jorge Ibarra, and Eduardo Torres Cuevas.[22] The thoughtful essay by Juan Luis Martín, "El combatiente cubano en función de pueblo," mentions briefly the recruitment of blacks in the service of guerrilla units.[23] Among the most notable exceptions is Fernando Portuondo del Prado, who acknowledged the participation of nearly thirty thousand *guerrilleros insulares*, "mostly peasants for whom no part of the interior countryside was unknown." Portuondo offered pointed reference to the wave of rural repression unleashed by troops of Spanish General Valmaseda in Oriente—*la cresciente de Valmaseda*—during the Ten Years' War as "accompanied by excellent creole guides."[24] Years later, on the occasion of the First National Congress of History in 1942 in Havana, Jorge Juárez y Sedeño chided the assembled Cuban historians for having failed to remember *las guerrillas de los batallones*, *las guerrillas locales*, *las guerrillas volantes*, *las guerrillas especiales, las guerrillas de Camajuaní*, *la guerrilla de Matanzas*, and *la guerrilla Cuba Española*.[25]

Difficult indeed to accommodate the presence of the many tens of thousands of Cubans as guerrillas without lacerating the historical sensibility of *lo cubano*, perhaps as many as one hundred thousand Cubans, suggested Miguel Varona Guerrero, a member of General Máximo Gómez's staff.[26] Years later, in 1941, geographer Salvador Massip would offer a rueful acknowledgment: "It is sadly known that the number of *guerrilleros* was far greater than the number of *insurrectos*."[27] The history of national liberation is murky indeed. Free Cuba was a contested construct all through the nineteenth century, a contest that persisted and reached deep into the twentieth century, circumstances that invite reexamination of the narratives of liberation. If the revolution has a history, so too most assuredly does the counterrevolution.

To admit the presence of Cubans who defended Spanish colonial sovereignty into the master narrative of national formation does not diminish the authenticity of the liberation narratives, of course. The credibility of the liberation chronicles will endure, for in the end they include truths that do indeed stand up well to close scrutiny. Rather, to address the presence of the guerrilla is to add complexity to the narrative of a century-long struggle against colonialism, a way to interrogate anew the multifaceted social dimensions and multiple political aspects of a complex drama of national formation, to appreciate some of the incongruities and inconsistencies of life as lived, and thereupon to arrive at a deeper understanding of the history that followed.

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