

If you stand for nothing, you'll fall for anything (Malcolm X)

Do Americans really want a *genuine* US policy that respects an independent Cuba?

Dr. T. P. Wilkinson

Race to Revolution:

The United States and Cuba During Slavery and Jim Crow

Gerald Horne

New York: Monthly Review Press, 2014

No later than the Wilsonian propaganda campaign to bring ordinary US citizens and the world to support US intervention in World War I, did the inhabitants — at least the 'white' ones — become convinced that not only was their nation the new Eden but that merely by virtue of being an American one was loved and/or envied throughout the world. It is crucial to mention this ideological transformation because until 1917, when the US entered the war on the side of the British elite, most inhabitants of the US could be seen as despised. Ex-slaves were despised because of their skin-colour and, despite the 13th amendment, their previous condition of servitude; and of the rest, all but the tiny inbred colonial elite were absorbed from countries whose regimes were glad to be rid of them.

America as a holy land and Americans as sanctified people, blessed by democracy and a special way of life, were an invention of the budding advertising and public relations industries that even today control the way Americans and much of the world see themselves and the 'land of opportunity'. Today it is literally inconceivable for the vast majority of US citizens to imagine that their country is not the supreme gift to civilisation and moreover that the rest of the world shares this delusion. Esteban Montejo, a Cuban of African origin and formerly enslaved, commented on the US invasion of Cuba in 1898:

‘ “Any fool here knew that the Americans blew up the Maine themselves to get into the war,” he asserted. Their arrival made the Spanish presence seem benign by comparison: “Frankly,” he averred, “I prefer the Spaniards to the Americans, the Spanish in Spain, that is. Everyone should stay in their own country, though the fact is I don’t like the Americans even in their own country.....the whole pack of degenerates who ruined this country!” was his bitter evaluation.’ ¹

Only by supposing for a moment that people outside the US, like Esteban Montejo over a century ago, do not share this image of the United States, can one begin to understand the Cuban Revolution. If one wants to grasp the roots of that revolution, it is necessary to reach back not to 1959 when the US-financed regime in Havana (then managed by Fulgencio Batista) collapsed and the 26 July Movement led by Fidel Castro took power — but closer to 1859 when Cuba was the last Caribbean stronghold of the slave trade.

bête noire

Following his *Negro Comrades of the Crown* (2012) and the *Counterrevolution of 1776* (2014), both also reviewed by this author,² Gerald Horne has written a book about the *bête noire* of US foreign policy for more than 50 years. Professor Horne’s most important contribution to US historical literature has been to explicitly rewrite and thus relocate US history within the history of the African diaspora. In another earlier book, *The End of Empires*, Horne illustrates that one of the greatest fears of the US ruling class has always been ‘other Africans’. Beginning with the *cordon sanitaire* erected against Haiti — the precursor to the Cuba embargo — US domestic and foreign policy have been consistently, even fanatically, driven by the imperative to keep its African slave labour force isolated from

¹ Horne (2014), p. 170

² At <<http://beforeitsnews.com/african-american-news/2012/11/1776-the-slaveholders-revolution-a-review-of-negro-comrades-of-the-crown-2444998.html>> and <<http://www.lobster-magazine.co.uk/free/lobster68/lob68-founding-fathers.pdf>>.

the rest of the world.³ The US regime has pursued a wide range of tactics to prevent its Africans from gaining or maintaining access to the outside world — especially to all the struggles against slavery or for political and economic independence.

Race to Revolution examines a central theatre in the white-settler regime's race wars: Cuba. While many benign treatments of the Cuban Revolution consider it to be a mere reaction to US policy failures — implying that the US regime had/has the capacity to pursue other policies than those it chose — Professor Horne describes the importance of Africans and Afro-Cubans in creating the culture upon which the Cuban independence movement was established. Here it is important to distinguish two ideas of independence that developed in the Spanish colony. One version is comparable to the settler-colonialist ideology that created the United States. After the French were expelled from Hispaniola (Saint Dominique) and the Republic of Haiti was founded, a stream of French slaveholders fled across the strait to Cuba. The abolition of slavery in the British West Indies forced immigration of slaveholders either to the US or to Cuba, the last outpost of plantation slavery and the slave trade in the Caribbean basin.

In the course of the Napoleonic Wars, Spain and Portugal became vassals to the British — who had driven Napoleon out of the peninsula. This of course increased the British pressure on Spain to abolish slavery too. While slavery and the slave trade were not suppressed in Cuba before the end of the 19th century, the *Ministerio de Ultramar* in Madrid knew that US and Spanish slaveholders in Cuba were promoting 'independence' from Spain but in favour of North American annexation or suzerainty. To combat this tendency among the plantation elite, concentrated in Western Cuba and Havana, the Spanish crown regularly threatened to abolish slavery — well aware that Cuba's enormous African population would resist absorption by the mainland slavocracy — and pose no small threat to the island's plantation class.

The other version of Cuban independence was arguably

³ *The End of Empires* (2009)

more complex. It was shaped not only by the Haitian Revolution but also by the Bolivar revolution in South America. Moreover Cuba's independence was influenced by the anti-slavery struggle in the US itself. Prior to its absorption into the Union, Spanish Florida had been a base from which free Africans waged war against the US slave regimes in Georgia and the Carolinas. Florida was closely linked to Cuba while still a Spanish colony and remained so even when it was ceded to Britain. The long tradition of Africans serving under arms — something inconceivable in the US — helped to create not only a military capacity in the Afro-Cuban population but established an early basis by which former slaves enjoyed social mobility in Cuba unheard of in North America. In other words there was not only the capacity to fight for independence but a class of Afro-Cubans who sustained a nationalist vision of that independence. This vision has been captured in the work of José Martí and Nicholas Guillén — both writing long before January 1959.

Importing Jim Crow

Until the US slavocracy was ended in 1865, Cuba continued as a staging ground for the North American slave trade, especially smuggling of slaves into Louisiana and Texas after importation had been formally prohibited. Slavery continued on the island after abolition in the US (as it did in Brazil). The ultimate defeat of Spain, when Admiral Dewey in Manila destroyed its Pacific fleet, permitted the US to dictate the terms of Cuban independence. That might have been the perfect moment for annexation had it not been for the importance of race in the US. There was no question of making Cuba a state with its coloured majority. Spaniards were traditionally seen by the US 'whites' as tainted by Africa and not really white. So the first thing for the North American regime to do was to import its race regime into the island. As Professor Horne writes:

'It did not take long for Washington to seek to bring Cuba into line, eroding the differing course of race relations that had characterized the island — and which

had incited US Negroes rapturously — by straining to impose a rigid Jim Crow.....As early as 1899 signs proclaiming “We Cater to White People Only” were posted at the insistence of US leaders, while the air was filled with alarm by candid remarks of what many considered to be a favourite mainland pastime: “Nigger Lynching.”” 4

However, despite the attempts by US occupying forces to install Jim Crow, ‘the islanders seemed to attain more success, with more rapidity, in combating Jim Crow than their mainland counterparts.’ Whereas white terrorism of the post-war South had succeeded in destroying the infrastructure created during Reconstruction to end slavery and guarantee Blacks their rights as citizens, the occupying forces lacked the means to suppress the Afro-Cuban population — a lesson even the US Army and Marines had learned when fighting in Oriente.⁵ In order to diminish the threat Cuba posed to ‘national security’, it was necessary to import more white folks from the mainland.

‘The establishment of what amounted to Euro-American colonial enclaves in Cuba — with 13,000 US nationals having title to land in Cuba by 1905 at a value of USD 50 million — was an essential element of this renewed foundation.....The United States had one of the largest, if not the largest, populations in the world of those who could be viewed as “white” and with more of them moving to the island, this quickened a process already in motion.’

Professor Horne cites historian Alejandro de la Fuente who wrote that the proportion of those not defined as white in Cuba’s population declined throughout the second half of the nineteenth century from 55 or 60 percent to about 33 percent by 1899.⁶ Whitening Cuba in the late 19th century was complementary to establishing the super-exploitation of the island and Jim Crow as one of the enforcement tools. Nearly a

4 Horne (2014), pp. 173-74

5 Oriente is the easternmost, largely mountainous province in Cuba, including the city of Santiago and Guantanamo.

6 Horne (2014), p. 175

century after Jean-Jacques Dessalines proclaimed independence from the French, the idea of Haiti still haunted the white elite in the US. Elihu Root, in his capacity as Carnegie attorney and War Secretary, also practically the colonial secretary to Theodore Roosevelt, was told as far as Cuban independence was concerned 'to go now would be to betray the cause of civilization and to turn this country within three months into a republic, not unlike those of Haiti or Santo Domingo'.⁷

Today critics of US Latin America policy reiterate that the Washington regime is always afraid of a 'good example' — of a country that manages to become independent and survive. However, this idea of the 'good example' is usually understood very narrowly, e.g. economic development, mature political institutions, social infrastructure. While these are certainly all qualities that the US regime has historically opposed — both at home and abroad — in the case of Cuba that is not enough. Cuba did not become a 'problem' for the mainland because of its economic aspirations alone. Rather Cuba became a problem because after the 1791 Haitian Revolution⁸ — effectively neutralised through Euro-American economic warfare — an independent Cuba would emerge as the relatively huge independent country in the hemisphere, ruled by Afro-Cubans, across the Florida strait, a mere 90 miles away from the highest lynching rate of any state in the Union — a peninsula terrorised by the DuPont dynasty and the Klan.⁹

Afro-Cubans and African-Americans

Race to Revolution tells another important story beyond the imperial mechanisms in New York City and Washington. That is

⁷ Horne (2014), p. 174

⁸ Haiti won its independence from France in 1804. It has been the only successful slave rebellion to depose slaveholders and the colonial apparatus. The success of the Haitian revolution sent a shock wave through the Western hemisphere probably only barely matched by the October Revolution that led to creation of the Soviet Union.

⁹ See Gerald Colby, *Beyond the Nylon Curtain* (1974) for details of the DuPont family and the Klan in Florida. Re-released as e-book in the Forbidden Bookshelf series, <<http://www.feedyourneedtoread.com/series/forbidden-bookshelf/>>.

the story of the close relationship between Afro-Cubans and African-Americans. It is the story of José Martí's inspiration among other places at Howard University, the intensity of cultural and political exchange between Cubans and Black North Americans,¹⁰ and the inspiration transmitted through the mainland and Cuban elements of the African diaspora.

It is also the story of the contradictions in Black America; the faction to emerge around Booker T. Washington and the other that would be identified with W.E.B. DuBois. This could probably best be seen with the emergence of Fulgencio Batista as the dominant figure in the Cuban state. Batista came to power in 1933 in a revolt against the reigning duopoly then under Gerardo Machado. This was the era of the Great Depression and Batista was not alone in using military-police power to introduce relatively progressive laws in the face of capitalist opposition. However what endeared Batista to many mainland Blacks was the fact that — at least in mainland terms — Batista was coloured.¹¹ While the full force of Jim Crow persisted into the 1960s within the US, Batista's government (1940–44) had adopted and enforced anti-discrimination laws unthinkable on the mainland. Communists were members of the legislature and held important government offices — also unthinkable in the US. When Batista appeared in the US he did not shy from contact with Black Americans either.

In 1952, returning from a sojourn in the US, he stood for President but then seized power in a coup that pre-empted elections. New Dealism was dead in the US and hence opposed by the US throughout the Western Hemisphere. Batista's return to power meant joining the US war against communism; and whatever politics Batista may have supported until 1944, US support for his regime meant following US policies for corporations on the island. Despite the racial regime applied on the mainland, however, Batista was seriously challenged to satisfy the Jim Crow wishes of the

¹⁰ E.g. Langston Hughes and Nicholas Guillén both fought on the Republican side in the Spanish Civil War.

¹¹ Here it should not be forgotten that US race law treated anyone with a 'drop of Negro blood' as Negro whereas virtually the opposite prevailed in the Caribbean, and a 'drop of white blood' made one 'white'.

white enclaves. Furthermore the overall economic situation created by restored super-exploitation and corruption inevitably added economic misery to the intensified racism.

Professor Horne's narrative is particularly striking because he details the conflicts over Cuba and especially loyalty to Batista among Blacks on the mainland. It is hard not to see this as an allegory for the determination of many Blacks in the US to remain loyal to Barack Obama — simply because he is Black. There were conflicting editorials throughout the Black press with those calling Batista a dictator to be deposed and those insisting that one of the few Black heads of state should not be attacked at all. Claude Barnett (Associated Negro Press), 'whose news service was a mainstay of mainland Negro opinion, continued to court Batista, consoling him in 1957 with the idea that press coverage of his misrule was "slanted and bordering on the unfair," but reminding him that "there is one section of the population which always stands for you. These are the Negro Americans"— "our hearts are with you," he exhorted.' ¹² Despite the support of the US, Batista was incapable of suppressing the 26 July Movement and the US regime abandoned Batista, who in turn was forced to abandon the island on 1 January 1959. Fidel Castro led his forces into Havana on 8 January.

Little more than a year later, 19 October 1960, President Eisenhower ordered an embargo against Cuba and authorised the first covert operations against the new government in Havana. The embargo and the preparations that led to CIA's aborted Bay of Pigs invasion in the first months of the Kennedy administration, have set the tone of US-Cuba relations since then. Officially the embargo was decreed because the new government of Fidel Castro nationalised assets claimed by US corporations.¹³ A special CIA focus —

¹² Horne (2014), p. 267

¹³ Both the public ones (oil cartels, utilities, distillers) and the covert ones (e.g. organised crime syndicates who operated casinos, brothels and the contraband markets): the details of the Cuban nationalisation orders are a subject in itself. Suffice it to say that both the overt and covert property owners in Cuba had enormous influence on the course of Cuba policy and still do.

directed largely together with help of both sides of the corporate apparatus in Miami — became covert operations against the Cuban state and economy. Since 1960 the embargo and other measures against the Republic of Cuba have increased in ferocity and mendacity. These policies have enjoyed a wide non-partisan consensus in the US, extending even to toleration by many on the so-called Left. Although the embargo has been condemned for decades in every international forum, the effective opposition to US Cuba policy has been virtually nil. The survival of the Cuban constitution, even after the collapse of the Soviet Union, divided the ostensibly pro-Cuba lobby into those who apparently feel that Cuba's government only survives because it is organised like a Caribbean 'Albania' and those who believe that if the embargo is ended, Cuba will finally see reason and join the world according to Washington.

A new policy?

Although this is not the explicit subject of Professor Horne's study, a careful reading of his work ought to lead to some very important criticisms of contemporary US policy and show *inter alia* how the failure to develop a dialectical understanding of race perpetuates misunderstanding about US policy and inadequate analysis of opposition to it. After years of unsuccessful campaigning for an end to the embargo of Cuba, the first Black US president — albeit only in the middle of his second term — announced on 17 December 2014 a 'new course' in Cuba relations. Mr Obama said:

'The new course is based on the belief that the best way to help bring freedom and opportunity to the Cuban people and to promote our own national security interests, including greater regional stability, and economic opportunities for American business is through this policy.'

But what is this new policy? He said the objectives of negotiations started with the government in Havana are 'reaccreditation of our diplomats — lifting travel restrictions, to

trying to lift the caps on the number of our diplomatic personnel, to gain unimpeded shipments for our mission, free access to our mission by Cubans...' ¹⁴ According to Mr Obama the US believes 'promoting freedom of speech and entrepreneurship and an active civil society will only strengthen Cuban society and help reintegrate Cuba into the international community.'

In another statement on 20 December 2014, US regime spokesmen pointed out that Cuba has 'an Internet penetration rate of 5%, among the lowest in the world'. Hence another objective is to persuade the Cuban government to 'permit the sale of technology that will begin to unleash the transformative effects of the Internet on the island.'

Alone the announcement that travel restrictions would be eased for US Americans (Cuba has never forbidden US citizens with valid visa documents to enter the country) sent waves through liberal and leftish America.¹⁵ Yet in the 'fine print' the State Department also explained 'there is no plan to change US policy'.

Mr Obama no longer talks about retaliation for Cuban nationalisation of US-claimed assets half a century ago. His explanation for the embargo does not mention the tortuous

Note 13 continued:

I follow a line of argument that has been made elsewhere that so-called 'Mafia' or 'organised crime' activities are simply the mirror of 'legal' corporate operations. Hence one could say that capitalism, especially but not limited to the US corporate state, comprises 'overt' corporations and 'covert' corporations. Part of CIA is the management of the interfaces between these two parts of corporate America. The institutional definition of 'crime' notwithstanding, there is no fundamental ideological difference between the two types of business. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the support sought and readily given by the both corporate sectors in combatting Cuba's revolution. One of the executive functions of the secret police and 'invisible armies' (CIA, DEA, FBI, *et al.*) is to manage relations between the state and these two competing and yet interlocking corporate blocks.

14 Barack Obama, address of 17 December 2014, quoted in US State Department briefing, 19 January 2015.

15 Philip Agee, author of *CIA Diary: Inside the Company*, harassed and deprived of his passport for revealing the extent and form of CIA operations throughout the hemisphere, spent the last years of his life organising travel for visitors to Cuba until he died in a Havana hospital in 2010.

application of the 1917 Trading with Enemy Act, the 1961 Foreign Assistance Act, the 1963 Cuba Assets Control Regulations, the 1992 Cuban Democracy Act, the 1996 Helms-Burton Act or the 2000 Trade Sanctions Reform and Export Enhancement Act. Nor does the US President mention the continuous covert war waged against the Republic of Cuba in violation of all generally accepted instruments of international law. The announced change of course is by the State Department's own admission, *not a change of policy*.

So what is the policy of the US 'Batista' in Washington? In his speeches he suggests to the willing listener that the US regime has finally reconciled itself to Cuban independence. He can do that for the same reason many Black leaders were willing to accept the original Cuban Batista — the very appearance of being non-white is deemed evidence of some mysterious Black essence, waiting to free us all. Mr Obama can also raise the naïve hopes of those who generally wish an end to the war against Cuba because they believe that this undeclared war is what has prevented Cuba from becoming just like the USA they love. However, the unstated policy of the US regime should not be ignored or overlooked. The Obama administration knows that the Internet is a critical weapon in the US political warfare arsenal just as the ubiquitous 'civil society' NGOs that have been deployed throughout Eastern Europe with deadly effect. Mr Obama also knows that the generation he is addressing knows nothing about the history of Cuba or Cuba-US relations.

Worse than all that, however, is that the targets of this stated policy — friendly, youthful, Internet tourists — do not understand the race in the revolution, they are blinded by the colour of the man in the White House. They are distracted by press performance, whether in the White House or State Department briefing rooms. They do not see the failure of the first Black president to reverse Black mass incarceration in the US or the racist covert war waged against Venezuela's non-white majority. They cannot imagine that Cubans fought, died and lived for more than a century to be Cuban and not US American.

These are not easy issues to understand or digest but Obama's December performances have been successful distractions. They rely for their impact on that feeling cultivated since 1917 that to be US American is something so special and unique that anyone wishing to be something else must be insane. This large segment of the US population and many loyal to the US regime see this as the stated policy to help others become the Americans they think they are — colour-blind and Internet-savvy, with Facebook and consumption for all.

Race to Revolution is not an easy book to digest because it defies easy linear explanations for complex political and social phenomena. However, Professor Horne's book is a fascinating depiction of the complexity of hemispheric politics and the crucially but generally and deliberately ignored relevance of the Black diaspora to human liberation in the Americas.

Dr T P Wilkinson writes, teaches History and English, directs theatre and coaches cricket in Heinrich Heine's birthplace, Düsseldorf. He is the author of Church Clothes, Land, Mission and the End of Apartheid in South Africa (Maisonneuve Press, 2003).