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Two variants of Caribbean nationalism: Marcus Garvey and Pedro Albizu Campos

JUAN MANUEL CARRIÓN

ABSTRACT

Some of the forms that collective identities and nationalism have taken in the Caribbean are analyzed in this paper, which examines two historical figures, one from Jamaica and the other from Puerto Rico: Marcus Garvey (1887–1940) and Pedro Albizu Campos (1891–1965), respectively. Both were black, radical, and politically persecuted. A history of nationalism in both Jamaica and Puerto Rico is impossible without taking them into account. Marcus Garvey is one of Jamaica's officially designated "national heroes." He was the first such person to whom this honor was conferred after Jamaica's independence in 1962. Garvey's name and portrait appear in some of Jamaica's currency, in public buildings, and in the names of streets. Puerto Rican nationalists consider Pedro Albizu Campos, one of the island's greatest patriots of the twentieth century. There are some important similarities in the life history and political career of these two Caribbean leaders. But their construction of the ideas of race and nationalism are very different. This paper compares the different ideas of

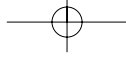
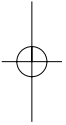


In contrast to Jamaica, Puerto Rico has not up to this moment achieved formal political independence. This is so in spite of the fact that nationalism in Puerto Rico has a relatively longer history. Albizu spent most of his adult life in jail as a consequence of his political activities, but today he is regarded in his country with considerable respect, although at the same time he is considered by many a wayward idealist. The memory of Albizu in Puerto Rico does not have the institutional support that Garvey's memory has in Jamaica. It cannot be the same because of the particular relationship Puerto Rico has with the United States. Notwithstanding the fact that Puerto Rico is still a colony, several schools, streets, and avenues have his name. The same can be said about cities in the United States such as New York and Chicago, where large numbers of Puerto Ricans live. There are important similarities in the life history and political career of these two Caribbean leaders. But a very different construction of ideas related to race and nationality separates the two men.

Garvey and Albizu had very different ideas about race and nationality as well as differences in the methods, strategies, and organizational procedures to carry these ideas forward. For Marcus Garvey race had priority over nation. He was an exponent of black nationalism; Jamaica as such was not his main concern. His fundamental goal was the improvement and liberation of his oppressed race, an oppression that was felt globally. In comparison, to Albizu "race" (*raza*) meant the "Hispanic race." Albizu was a hard critic of race relations in the United States. His characterization of the United States as a racist country is not so very different from that of Garvey.

In Garvey's interpretation the United States was a country racist to its core. In 1921 Garvey was not completely wrong thinking that the United States was controlled by white supremacists. According to Garvey it was a "fact that the spirit of the Ku Klux Klan is in 80 or 90 percent of the white Americans" (Garvey [1921a] 1995: 188). Besides recognizing the importance of American racism, Albizu's characterization of the United States had the intention of deconstructing the persona that "imperial" propaganda had created. Against the rhetoric of freedom, liberty, and democracy Albizu would say in 1933: "We know the strength of the North American plutocracy and how it exploits its own fellow citizens in the continent" (Albizu Campos [1930] 1975a: 116).¹ Contrary to what Puerto Ricans are led to believe, people in the United States "have no equality, no liberty, nor fraternity among themselves. ... The Yankee people is a slave people..." (Albizu Campos [1933] 1975b: 334).²

For Albizu, to be obsessed with race was an American mania, an involvement he





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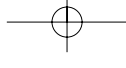
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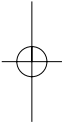
homogeneity is a much older and more common feature in the Hispanic Caribbean than in the other islands and territories of the region (Hoetink 1971: 178). These cultural qualities influence the development of nationalism. In the Hispanic Caribbean, in comparison with the rest of the Caribbean, one finds national identities that are much older in appearance and are much more widely diffused across class and racial divides.

Differences in the construction of racial, ethnic, and national identities throughout the Caribbean respond to particularities of historical development. Colonialism, although a common historical feature throughout the region, has not been, for example, the same in its structure and its consequences for the societies of the Caribbean. Franklin W. Knight (1990) makes the analytically useful distinction between exploitation colonies and settler colonialism. The cultural consequence of exploitation colonies is a greater degree of heterogeneity and social fissures. No actual or historical society in the Caribbean can be described as being purely one type or the other, although the French colony of Saint-Domingue (Haiti) came very close to being a pure expression of exploitation colonialism. At the opposite end, the features of settler colonialism are more commonly present in the Caribbean region, in those places where Spain once ruled.

In a recent study Winston James (1998) reiterates the importance of the distinction between the Hispanic and non-Hispanic Caribbean to understand the particularities of nationalism in the region. Significantly, black nationalism is of scant resonance in the Hispanic Caribbean, where, on the contrary, “popular cross-racial nationalism” has been a feature of society in Cuba and in Puerto Rico. The myth of racial democracy has been an ever-present feature of Hispanic Caribbean nationalism. In recent decades the deconstruction of the Hispanic myth of racial democracy has become almost an industry. So many examples can be drawn to posit the existence of racism in the Hispanic Caribbean that it is very easy to argue that reality disproves the myth. The myth of racial democracy, just as any other myth, can become a tool of the powerful against the weak, but it can also be something more. As de la Fuente (1999) argues, hegemonic myths of this type have to incorporate by necessity some of the interests of the subordinate groups. He criticizes the critics by pointing out how the subordinate racial groups utilize the myth of racial democracy for their own benefit in spite of the fact of continuing socioeconomic inequality among the groups.

The Caribbean has been a difficult region for the development of national identities and nationalist projects. The nation is a “great solidarity,” a “deep horizontal





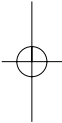
In terms of social origins Marcus Garvey can perhaps be described as belonging to a rural petite bourgeoisie. His father and grandfather were master masons (Stein 1986: 24) and as such relatively well-off artisans in what was in some ways a peasant economy. Garvey's education was mostly self-taught. In formal terms he did not go beyond primary education, although he was well read and a life-long student of oratory. In pursuit of oratical skills he studied the speaking style of church ministers in Jamaica and parliamentary members in London. At the peak of his career he was considered by some "one of the world's greatest orators" (Martin 1983: 13), although in the last years of his life he was reduced to being a soap-box orator in the speaker's corner of London's Hyde Park. Following his artisanal origins he became early on in his life an apprentice to a printer and was a foreman printer by the time he was 18 years old. These acquired skills as a printer would be very important throughout his life, for one of the areas in which he distinguished himself was as a publisher of newspapers and magazines.

The beginnings of Albizu are very different. Garvey was a black man of dark complexion, while Albizu was a mulatto, whose skin color was many times described as similar in complexion to the natives of the Indian subcontinent. Socially speaking Albizu's origins are much lower than Garvey. Albizu was the illegitimate son of a white Puerto Rican of the land-owning class. His father did not recognize his paternity until very late, when his wife was dead and his son was already 23 years old. In spite of the father's neglect Albizu would speak fondly about his father and carry with pride his surname. His mother was a black woman employed by his father's family. She died when Albizu was only 4 years old, so his origins are basically those of an orphan. A maternal aunt took care of him. His early years were of great poverty. He began school relatively late, when he was 9 years old, but was able to graduate from high school with high honors by the time he was 19 years old.

Like Garvey, Albizu is remembered as a great speaker. Albizu's oratical skills were first tested in high school, and by that time he was winning speaking contests both in Spanish and in English. Unlike Garvey, Albizu's post-secondary education was top rated. After graduating from high school he was able to go to a university in Vermont, thanks to a scholarship provided by a freemason lodge in Ponce, his native city. He ended up with a bachelor's degree and a Juris Doctor degree from Harvard University before he returned to Puerto Rico in 1922.

Garvey's years of greatest success as a leader were from 1919 to 1923, while living in the United States. During those years the organization that he created, the Universal





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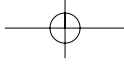
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Pedro Albizu Campos inside the San Juan Cathedral, surrounded by a multitude, during the Te Deum honoring his return to Puerto Rico, December 15, 1947. Photographer unknown. The Ruth M. Reynolds Papers, Archives of the Puerto Rican Diaspora. Centro de Estudios Puertorriqueños, Hunter College, CUNY. Reprinted, by permission, from Centro de Estudios Puertorriqueños.

was held in London in 1900. This was in many ways an elitist and conservative leadership. As self-proclaimed leaders of their people they propose as a solution to their common problems a strategy based on hard work to accumulate capital and education to remedy a “civilizational deficit” they recognized existed vis-à-vis the Western world, dominated by whites. Garvey shared many things with this leadership. Booker T. Washington, preeminent black leader in the U.S. in the late nineteenth century, was, for example, an inspiration to him. Garvey decided to become a “racial leader” after reading Washington’s book *Up From Slavery*. Garvey shared his civilizationist bent, as can be seen in the “improvement” part in the name of the organization he created: the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA). Garvey’s communality with this past leadership can also be attested to in the entrepreneurial strategy that he preferred. A fundamental part of Garvey’s Negro ideology was a type of economic nationalism. Before political empowerment came





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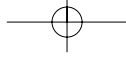
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of values where European esthetic values would be confronted by the slogan “Black is beautiful” and history rewritten in a fashion that today would be called Afro-centric. Racially based nationalisms, one must admit, are dangerous, and Garvey was in many ways a racist. He was capable of making very nasty remarks against Jews and also against miscegenation. But Garvey’s racism was of a special kind, of the kind José Martí (Ortiz 1953) called “on the rebound” (*de rebote*). Garvey’s opinions about race were to a large extent shaped by his experience of racism on the part of whites and also by his experience with the mulatto elites of his native Jamaica.

Garvey’s racial politics in the U.S. were deeply influenced by his Jamaican background, where minute distinctions of color and ancestry could be quite important. In the article he published in *Current History* in 1923 Garvey gave a short account of his racial background and context. “My parents were black negroes” (Garvey [1923] 1986: 124). This is a fact Garvey wants us to know because when he was born “there was so much color prejudice in Jamaica.” In Jamaica “nobody wanted to be Negro.” There were many “black-whites” in Jamaica — these were the “colored men of the island who did not want to be classified as negroes, but as white.” There was hostility between Garvey and the rivals whom he identified with the “black-whites.” Garvey would talk about “the wicked and vicious opposition” he had met “from among my own people, especially among the very lightly colored” (Garvey [1923] 1986: 133).

Self-reliance was a second important element in Garveyism. In contrast to the NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People), which was founded in 1909 with the participation of white liberals, Garvey’s organization, the UNIA, prided itself in having an exclusively black membership. The oppression of blacks will come to an end by black people’s own efforts and not by perpetuating a dependence upon whites. This was a proposition that could not always be followed. For example, most of the captains in the ships of the Black Star Line were whites because there were not enough blacks qualified for these positions early in the twentieth century. An even greater contradiction, given Garvey’s beliefs, was his two-hour meeting in 1922 with Edward Clarke, one of the top-ranking members of the Ku Klux Klan. This was perhaps the weirdest episode in Garvey’s career.

In Garveyism the third important element is a particular conception of nationhood. For Garvey the political composition of the nation had by force of structural circumstances a racial character. Garvey’s goal was “to bring Negroes together for the building up of a nation of their own. And why? Because we have been forced to



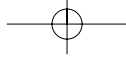


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Albizu applauds the crossing and mixing of cultures and races, not as a celebration of diversity but as a celebration of a special type of unity that arises out from the blurring of differences. This viewpoint is typical of Latin American ideologies of *mezizaje*. According to Albizu: “We are a people predestined in history because Puerto Rico is the first nation in the world where the unity of the spirit takes shape together with the biological unity of the body” (Albizu Campos [1933] 1975b: 324).¹² In Puerto Rico all this mixing was “restoring man to his pristine originality” (Albizu Campos [1933] 1975b: 324).¹³ Albizu’s concept of the Puerto Rican nation can demand a political commitment but does not exclude anyone because of ethnic or racial origin. According to Albizu “Puerto Ricans are all the friends of the independence of Puerto Rico” (Torres 1975: 275).¹⁴ Albizu preferred to use the word race with cultural and not with biological connotations. “For us race has nothing to do with biologyRace is the perpetuity of virtues and characteristic institutions. We are distinguished by our culture, by our valor, by our nobility, by our catholic sense of civilization” (Albizu Campos [1935] 1981: 118).¹⁵ Let us not forget that catholic means universal.

In sharp contrast to Garvey, in Albizu the racial question becomes subsumed in his concept of a transracial fatherland. For Albizu the Puerto Rican nation was an “ethnonation,” multiracial but ethnically homogeneous. In this Albizu was working within a typical Hispanic Caribbean context. A similar concept of the nation can be found in Cuba, defended up to this moment (Guanche Pérez 1996). For Albizu the Puerto Rican nation is a living reality produced by a long historical process. This process has created an ethnically based nation in spite of racial differences, and this is a nation related in kinship to neighboring nations of the same cultural background.

Both Garvey and Albizu were explicit in their egocentric point of view, even if Garvey propelled a racial definition of the nation and Albizu defended a nonracial understanding of nationality. Garvey told his followers: “Your entire obsession must be to see things from the Negro’s point of view” (Garvey [1927] 1987: 193). In his essay “African Fundamentalism,” he stated: “There is no humanity before that which starts with yourself ‘Charity begins at home.’ First to thyself be true, and thou canst not then be false to any man” (Garvey [1925a] 1987: 5). Albizu had a similar point of view.



criticized because for his praise of Spain as the “Mother Country.” He clearly exaggerated when he said that Spain was one of the few countries in the world that “had always been civilized,” or when he emphasized the links between Puerto Rican culture and “Greco-Latin civilization” (Albizu Campos [1933] 1975b: 325).¹⁹ But these exaggerations had a purpose, namely, to counteract the U.S. imperial discourse about Puerto Rican backwardness and uncultured ways that was used to argue unfitness for self-rule.

Albizu also exaggerated the positive aspects of the social and economic conditions of Puerto Rico before the American invasion. In 1930, in an article published in *El Mundo* commenting on a report published by the Brookings Institute about the economy of Puerto Rico, Albizu said: “The legion of proprietors that we had in 1898 must rise again” (Albizu Campos [1930] 1975a: 103).²⁰ This exaggeration has the kernel of truth in that there is a clear reference to the processes of concentration and centralization of property that took place under the aegis of U.S. capital after 1898. This exaggeration also had the purpose of combating “U.S. sinister designs” and the impact of “Yankee propaganda.” According to the American colonial myth, Puerto Rico’s history had begun in 1898, and the invasion had been an act of enlightenment for the Puerto Rican masses, who were then able to enjoy U.S. philanthropy and humanism.

Historical revisionism was even more important for Marcus Garvey. Looking back through time, Garvey saw a drama in which blacks were the original civilized people but whose civilization had been stolen from them, and to make things worse, whites had been treacherously able to make blacks forget their glorious past. According to Garvey’s historical account the white man “owes all he possess today to the Negro. The Negro gave him science and art and literature and everything that is dear to him today” (Garvey [1919] 1996: 243). Garvey was a pioneer in the academic fashion that today goes by the name “Afrocentrism.” According to this viewpoint many historical figures are reinterpreted as black. Jesus Christ is, for example, seen in a new light as someone who had “much of Negro blood in him” (Garvey [1927] 1987: 196). Garvey’s historical inventiveness sought to redress centuries of mental and cultural oppression that lay like a hard crust on top of all the history of economic exploitation and political oppression that blacks had had to suffer for so long. The inventiveness of his approach to historical data was a conscious process. Garvey made a recommendation to his followers: “Even if you cannot prove it always claim that the Negro was great” (Garvey [1927] 1987: 194). According to Garvey: “Things that may not be true can be made if you repeat them long enough, therefore, always repeat statements that will give your race a status and an advantage. That is how the white man has built up his system of superiority” (Garvey [1927] 1987: 194). In what



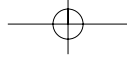
Albizu and Garvey were also leaders accused of authoritarianism and messianic qualities. But all of these details do not sum up into a convincing argument about the fascism of one or the other. In the case of Albizu his characterization as fascist is denied by the experience of being defended in the 1930s by the American leftist congressman Vito Marcantonio and the fact that in 1943, when Albizu left the Atlanta jail, his train ticket to New York City was paid by the American Communist Party.

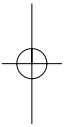
In the Caribbean, things are not always what they seem to be. The Caribbean attractions shown in tourist brochures fail to include by design those features that are a testimony to a history of oppression and racial and class struggles. Garvey and Albizu both represent sincere and radical popular expressions of opposition to colonialism. Their differences are illustrations of Caribbean diversity in the process of formation of national identities.



NOTES

- 1 “... conocemos la fuerza de la plutocracia norteamericana y como explota a sus propios conciudadanos en el continente.”
- 2 “... no tiene igualdad, ni libertad, ni fraternidad entre los suyos.... El pueblo yanqui es un pueblo esclavo.”
- 3 “... la comprensión de lo que es la nacionalidad. No sólo es la unidad étnica, cultural y religiosa de la sociedad humana, sino también la comunidad de sus intereses materiales sobre un territorio determinado, en el cual sus propios hijos sean dueños y señores.”
- 4 “Desde el mismo momento de la invasión norteamericana, se sentaron las bases legales para nuestro despojo colectivo.”
- 5 “... la necesidad de abandonar, de desterrar la mala costumbre de la súplica y petición; que Puerto Rico debe exigir lo que por derecho le corresponde, le pertenece...”
- 6 “Una nación como la norteamericana ... no tiene tiempo para atender a hombres sumisos y serviles...”
- 7 “Es necesario plantear valientemente nuestras relaciones frente a Estados Unidos con la actitud valiente y decidida que requiere el caso.”
- 8 “... no hay margen para una actitud fraternal y solidaria con los enemigos de la patria.”
- 9 “... formamos una cadena con esos pueblos indomitos, cuyo ejemplo debemos imitar.”
- 10 “Nuestra situación dolorosa bajo el Imperio de Estados Unidos es la situación que pretende norteamérica imponer a todos los pueblos hermanos nuestros del continente. Nuestra causa es la causa continental. ... Puerto Rico y las otras antillas constituyen el campo de batalla entre el imperialismo yanqui y el iberoamericanismo.”
- 11 “... el nacionalismo postula cuatro hermosos principios: la independencia de Puerto Rico, la Confederación Antillana, la unión panamericana y la hegemonía de los pueblos





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