

Programa Interuniversitario de Historia Política

Foros de Historia Política – Año 2017

www.historiapolitica.com

Comments on: **“Plattismo, antiplattismo y antiimperialismo: notas sobre inflexiones, usos y disputas entre los intelectuales en Cuba durante la Primera República (1900-1925)”** by Manuel Muñiz

Barry Carr (La Trobe University - Melbourne, Australia)

The first two decades of the twentieth century were the seedbed of anti-imperialist thought throughout the Americas. Although anti-imperialism was, by the early and mid 1920s, very much a continental-wide phenomenon - indeed, some iterations of anti-imperialist thought and an increasing number of the political practices they fed called for concerted continent-wide campaigns against US imperialism - the saliency and urgency of anti-imperialist ideas varied enormously because of geographical factors. There was in fact a complex cartography of anti-imperialist thinking. While some of the key Latin American antiimperialists came from the Rio de la Plata area – Manuel Ugarte, Alfredo Palacios, José Ingenieros, just to take some Argentinian examples and the Uruguayan poet José Enrique Rodó was also a continuing influence- US imperialism was clearly a much stronger and real threat in the greater Circum Caribbean, the region bounded by Mexico, the countries of Central America though Colombia and Venezuela, and the insular Caribbean states.

Cuba, unsurprisingly, was the site of a particularly rich tapestry of anti-imperialist ideas shaped by the peculiar circumstances of its late independence from Spain and its multi-stranded relationship with the new (and next-door) hegemon, the United States. At the end of its military contest with Spain 1895-1898, the scope and intensity of US intervention in the Greater Caribbean expanded markedly. A series of military occupations and interventions (in Cuba: 1898-1902, 1906-1909, 1912 and 1918-20; in Haiti: 1915-1934; and the Dominican Republic: 1916-1924 and, of course in Nicaragua: with multiple interventions culminating in the US Marine occupation of

1927-1932) ratcheted up and radicalized anti-imperialist thought and action all over the Americas, giving rise to some early examples of anti-imperialist solidarity expressed in print, in the actions of new organizations, and in armed resistance.

The first two decades of the twentieth century, then, were especially rich laboratories in which anti-imperialisms (I insist on the plural form here) underwent multiple transformations and adaptations, and new forms of resistance emerged with varying degrees of success. Unsurprisingly, later generations of anti-imperialists in the 1960s and beyond have looked back on this period to ‘rescue’ and appropriate examples of precursor anti-imperialist agitation and thought that provide convenient foundational departures for their own policies. Unfortunately, this ‘precursorism’ also encourages approaches that essentialize, decontextualize and excessively homogenize ideas and practices and ignore the complex and often internally quite unstable meanings generated by the concrete historical situations in which texts were created and political options selected. One of the many merits of the article by Manuel Muñiz is that it manages to avoid falling into many of these traps and it delivers a sophisticated survey of Cuban texts that does not ignore questions of contingency and conjuncture and that acknowledges the many and often contradictory understandings and uses of anti-imperialism that circulated in early post-Independence Cuba.

The essay is very much an exercise in intellectual history involving readings of texts – including both canonical and some lesser well-known authors – written by intellectuals, academics, poets, writers and lawyers during Cuba’s First Republic (1900-1925). For some (unexplained) reason the article stops in 1925 with the hunger strike carried out Julio Antonio Mella, student leader and one of the founders of Cuban Communism, an event which Muñiz rightly sees as a major turning point in the radicalization of anti-imperialist action when a coalition of anti-imperialist intellectuals come together to protest the actions of the Gerardo Machado government (1925-1933).

Muñiz examines not only anti-imperialist thought but also the many different ways in which Cuban intellectuals viewed and responded to the Platt Amendment, a document that provided political and ‘legal’ authority for US political, economic and military intervention in Cuban affairs until the Amendment’s abrogation 1934. While the

Amendment and plattismo were permanent references for public intellectuals and politicians one of the achievements of the essay is its insistence that scholars must try and understand how uses and understandings of both these terms could change over time. This insistence on what I would call the ‘situational complexity’ underpinning the surprisingly varied appropriations of anti-imperialist discourses, along with Muñiz’ s commitment to understanding how these different uses were driven by political circumstances, is the most valuable contribution of this important essay.

The history of Cuban anti-imperialism in this period certainly produced some unusual combinations. One could, for example, be a strong anti-imperialist but at the same time maintain an ambivalent and even approving stance towards the Platt Amendment. This was the case with those intellectuals who admired the material sophistication and republican values of the United States but who saw US interventionism as not so much the result of an inherent economic and imperial logic but the consequence of the failings of the corruption, mediocrity and nepotism of Cuba’s cacique-ridden political elite during the Primera República. One could, then, simultaneously reject and admire the United States, condemning at the same time its economic pretensions and drive to exercise tutelage while arguing that its republican model had great merit for a seriously deficient Cuba.

Other Cuban intellectuals defended the Platt Amendment as the most effective way of guaranteeing Cuban independence and defending the young Republic against other regional imperialisms – originating in Europe, for example, or against the still powerful hispanophilia that had survived the military defeat of Spain and still flourished well into the 1920s. Even when more radical anti-imperialist voices (among them students, leftist workers, the Veterans and Patriots movement, for example) emerged after the economic collapse of the early 1920s (the ‘danza de los millones’ followed by the ‘foxtrot de la miseria’), and amid a growing refusal of public intellectuals to participate in national politics, there were anti-imperialists who responded in a reactionary and classist manner to worker militancy and whose conservative nationalism rejected all ‘isms’ that were not authentically ‘Cuban’.

The increasing ‘latinamericanization’ of anti-imperialist discourse and projects that occurred in the 1920s also affected developments in Cuba. Muñiz reminds us that

intellectuals such as Emilio Roig de Leuchsenring and Enrique Gay Calbó embraced calls for continent-wide anti-imperialist action while expressions of solidarity with the people of countries occupied by the US military - the Dominican Republic was the most important example – became progressively stronger. The international setting inflected Cuban anti-imperialism in other ways too. The range of foreign writers whose work influenced Cuban intellectuals grew significantly. Muñiz notes that Julio Antonio Mella (who, unusually for the Cuban writers under consideration, had an excellent command of English) was the first Cuban to use the pioneering studies on US imperialism produced by Scott Nearing. Cubans published in and were in turn influenced by new continental anti-imperialist projects like the Unión Latinoamericana and the Comintern-affiliated Liga Antiimperialista de las Américas (LADLA), as well as the proposals of APRA and Central American unionismo.

The impact of developments outside Cuba and their role in shaping the evolution of anti-imperialism on the island could, I think, be expanded. The US military occupation of the Dominican Republic was only one example of US military intervention in the region. Haitian nationalists and anti-imperialists also saw Cuba as fertile terrain for building solidarity networks in the 1920s and the radicalization of Puerto Rican nationalism (the figure of Pedro Albizu Campos is central) did not go unnoticed in Cuba either. Interestingly, both Albizu Campos and Mella followed political developments in Ireland and the history of Irish nationalism and the novel tactics it advocated very closely, and it would be useful to explore the importance for Cubans of intellectual and political experiences that unfolded a long way from the Americas. The December 1925 hunger strike, an event that galvanized radical and nationalist and anti-imperialist intellectuals around the cause of the imprisoned Julio Antonio Mella, owed a great deal, for example, to the young Communists' Irish background and interests.

As someone who is interested in the development of transnational networks of exiles and radical and revolutionary activists in the Greater Circum Caribbean my reading of Muñiz's essay leads me to make some further suggestions about this excellent piece of work. Would a broadening of the understanding of the term 'intellectual' to include reflective writing generated in spaces outside the world of the academy, revistas político-culturales and the narrow sphere of elite politics in Cuba expand our

understanding of the multiple anti-imperialisms that circulated in Cuba? I am thinking here of the magazines and newspapers produced in Cuba by other protagonists: workers (both anarchist and more broadly anti-capitalist in complexion), and university students. And what do we know about the writings and publications of Cubans resident (and, under Gerardo Machado increasingly exiled) in the United States and in several other Latin American countries and who were contributors to the rising tide of anti-imperialist debate? It would also be immensely helpful to know about the size and extent of the public audience for the anti-imperialist texts that Muñiz explores.

One might also ask how far the combination of what might seem to be incompatible positions by anti-imperialists in Cuba (of the kind studied by Muñiz) was replicated in other countries in Latin America? In fact, there are plenty of examples that suggest that the Cuban case was not unique. The Mexican philosopher and writer, José Vasconcelos, in the 1920s, at least, combined passionate anti-imperialism on a continental scale (directed both against US hegemonism and its Latin American satraps like Peru's Augusto Leguía and Juan Vicente Gómez in Venezuela) alongside an intense hispanophilia and celebration of Indo-América, as well as hostility to left-wing inflections of anti-imperialism. Augusto C. Sandino is another figure whose anti-imperialism did not remotely fit into the neat categories employed later on by Nicaraguan intellectuals and activists who appropriated his movement to build the neo-sandinismo of the 1960s and 1970s. Sandino, heavily influenced by José Vasconcelos, embraced a visceral anti-americanism that owed very little to the formal influence of socialist and Marxist ideas, a passionate hispanofilia, plus the celebration of mestizaje and Indo-latino heritage. In fact, the more we examine Latin American anti-imperialism in the 1920s the more clearly we see that anti-imperialists and anti-imperialist thought resemble a 'coat of many colours'. Muñiz's fine essay is, then, a wonderfully helpful exploration of the complicated pathways along which anti-imperialism travelled in the Cuban case, and it joins a growing number of refreshingly open and non-teleological studies that are revising our understanding of the early decades of the 'Neocolonial Republic'.