Frank Bonilla

Education and Early Career

Born in New York in 1925 of parents who migrated to the U.S. from Puerto Rico, Bonilla lived as a child in East Harlem and the Bronx, though several years of middle and high school were spent in Tennessee and Illinois. In many of his writings and speeches, he described his school years in the South as transformative. The concept and implications of race in the United States first became constituted for him at the Mason-Dixon Line where, though his New York birth certificate categorized him as white, he was instructed by the driver of a Greyhound Bus to surrender his seat and move to the back. His subjection to forced segregation in the South, combined with the social, political, and economic marginalization of Puerto Ricans in New York, informed his career choices and life trajectory.

Following his graduation from Morris High School in the South Bronx in 1943, Bonilla was drafted into the U.S. Army. Due to his strong background in languages (he had learned French and German while in school in Illinois), he was recommended for a specialized training program in the Army. He was assigned to a weapons platoon and trained as a mortar gunner with the 290th Infantry Regiment, 75th Infantry Division. He went on to fight in the Battle of the Bulge in the Ardennes Mountains of Belgium. When an injury removed him from the front lines, Bonilla was sent to a hospital in Paris where he remained for...
three weeks. Upon recovering, he was transferred to a replacement depot just outside of Paris where he was slated to be redeployed. There, along with approximately eight other Puerto Ricans, he was recruited to join the ranks of the 65th Infantry Division, a unit with its origins in Puerto Rico, which at the time was based just outside of Frankfurt, Germany. Renowned for its bravery, the 65th Infantry Division had seen action throughout Europe and North Africa, and its members demonstrated an evident pride in their Puerto Rican roots. Although Bonilla and the rest of his Americanized counterparts experienced some initial prejudice from their island born counterparts, they eventually became an integral part of the group and even traveled with them back to Puerto Rico at the end of the war. A milestone in Bonilla’s life given that this was the first time he had visited the island.

Upon returning to the U.S., he earned his B.B.A. in 1949, graduating cum laude from the College of the City of New York, his M.A. in Sociology from New York University in 1954, and his doctorate in sociology from Harvard University in 1959.

Bonilla began his academic career in 1960 as a member of The American Universities Field Service in Latin America. Starting with a project initiative on behalf of UNESCO and the Economic Commission for Latin America, his research for the next three years in Argentina, Chile, Mexico, and Brazil investigated the relationship between social development and education in Latin America. In this period, Bonilla lectured at seven U.S. campuses and at the Pontifícia Universidade Católica do Rio de Janeiro.

When Bonilla joined the Political Science Department at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) (1963-1969), he pursued his interests in Latin America as a senior staff member at MIT’s Center of International Studies. He joined an extensive investigation into Venezuelan politics, conducted in collaboration with the Center for Development Studies of the Central University of Venezuela (CENDES), served as program advisor in social science to the Ford Foundation in Brazil, and lectured as visiting professor at the Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais. His support for his Latin American students and collaboration with Latin American colleagues continued for decades following his return to the United States.

Bonilla’s years of residence and research agenda in Latin America yielded several notable books. *The Failure of Elites* (1970) presented a far-sighted study of how oil companies and the U.S. state in the 1960s acted as socializing agents in Venezuela, producing leaders in business, politics, and the armed forces who became partners of multinational capital but lost the capacity to act on behalf of national development. Bonilla found that Venezuelan elites in the period had little or no sustained contact with the mass of people and no sense of obligation to meet the needs of the population. The second book, *Student Politics in Chile* (1970), co-authored with Myron Glazer, contributed a vital piece to the comparative study of campus politics in Latin America by offering a comprehensive view of the Chilean student movement from the early 1900s to the 1960s.

As a professor of political science and senior associate of the Institute of Political Studies at Stanford University (1969-1972), Bonilla created opportunities for dialogue among Latin Americans, Chicanos, African Americans, and Puerto Ricans in the United States. In 1972, Brazilian, Venezuelan, Panamanian, Jamaican, Argentinian, African American, Chicano, and Puerto Rican scholars and students attended a seminar to explore ways to establish a common framework for analyzing inequality and dependence. The seminar produced *Structures of Dependency*, the volume of essays edited by Bonilla and Robert Girling that challenged the dominant dependency paradigm used by the Leftist academy to analyze Latin American political economies. In his contribution, Bonilla noted as one major flaw of dependency theory its failure to identify strategies that would permit oppressed nations to act against imperialism.

The Stanford seminar was also an occasion for developing critical perspectives on theoretical and methodological approaches in the study of Latinos and other minority groups in the U.S. As an early advocate of the militant efforts of minority students and faculty to establish space within U.S. universities and to accomplish their own intellectual work, Bonilla joined students, faculty, and community activists in New York in proposing a research institute for investigating the Puerto Rican experience. When the proposal was accepted and funded by CUNY and the Ford Foundation, the search
committee formed in early 1973 unanimously chose Bonilla as the first director of the Center for Puerto Rican Studies. [2] The forming of the Centro and his appointment as director was a profoundly significant personal achievement, as it gave Bonilla the opportunity to return to New York to serve his community in ways that would have a profound and long-lasting impact.

Tenure at Centro

Most significantly, in his 23-tenure as director, Bonilla provided the intellectual, political, and organizational leadership that helped to define the field of Puerto Rican studies and to firmly establish the Centro as a vital academic and community resource. Within a short time of its founding, the Centro’s organizational structure and research agendas were shaped by commitments to collective governance, scholarship in service of community, and broad accessibility.

As director of the only university-based institute in the United States devoted to the interdisciplinary study of the Puerto Rican experience, Bonilla oversaw research in history, political economy, demographic transitions, and social and cultural development. His most well-known contributions were made to the History Task Force, through his close collaboration with Ricardo Campos. In the published version of its findings, Labor Migration under Capitalism (1979), the History Task Force critiqued the dependency framework as inadequate for explaining the colonial relationship between Puerto Rico and the U.S. and located the root of massive post-World War II labor migration from the island to the U.S. paradoxically in the development model known as Operation Bootstrap. In a subsequent study, “A Wealth of Poor: Puerto Ricans in the New Economic Order” (1981), Bonilla and Campos further illustrated the flaws of the political-economic model which caused persistently high levels of unemployment, extreme social stress, and “brain drain” from Puerto Rico to the United States.

Bonilla was also greatly concerned about the disproportionate levels of imprisonment in communities of color and the need for prison reform. Bringing the experience of similar initiatives with him from Stanford, he encouraged the Centro’s Prison Task Force to develop a program of college study for inmates in New York. He worked resolutely worked for community empowerment by joining dozens of community-based and policy advocacy organizations and coalitions intent on combating institutional racism and promoting educational opportunities for minorities; in many cases, he was the principal public spokesperson. He served on the boards of directors of the Empowerment Institute of the Community Service Society of the City of New York, a 140-year-old nonprofit organization involved in social and education issues, and of Open Mind, The Association for the Achievement of Cultural Diversity in Higher Education. A small sample of additional affiliations includes the Social Science Advisory Board of the Poverty and Race Research Institute, the National Puerto Rican Task Force on Educational Policy, and the Puerto Rican Organization for Growth, Research, Education and Self-Sufficiency (P.R.O.G.R.E.S.S., Inc.). Throughout his life, he remained committed to strengthening bonds between African Americans and Puerto Ricans. Of special note are his participation in the National Commission on Minorities in Higher Education, his advocacy of redistricting policy reform, and his invited testimonies before the U.S. Congressional Black Caucus on the deleterious effects of U.S. colonialism in Puerto Rico.

Despite his extensive community commitments and administrative responsibilities, Bonilla was a passionate educator who was broadly accessible to his students at CUNY’s Graduate Center, where he taught in the Political Science Department from 1973 to 1993 and in the Sociology Department from 1977 to 1993. In 1986, he was appointed Thomas Hunter Professor of Sociology at CUNY’s Hunter College. As a popular dissertation advisor at the Graduate Center, Bonilla mentored many students who remained close to him long after completing their degrees. Throughout his life, he encouraged new scholars to understand the political implications of social scientific research and to embrace their potential role in the service of liberation of oppressed peoples.

Ten years after his retirement, Bonilla was honored by the staff and friends of the Center for Puerto Rican Studies at its 30th anniversary celebration in 2003, where he received a Lifetime Achievement Award presented by Rossana Rosado, publisher and CEO of El Diario-La Prensa, the oldest Spanish-language daily newspaper in the United States.
Inter-University Program for Latino Research

One of the most enduring projects Bonilla launched as the Centro’s Director is the Inter-University Program for Latino Research (IUPLR), co-founded with three colleagues in 1986. What began as a national consortium of eight university-based research centers grew to include more than twenty universities and to serve as a model for other initiatives that pursue interdisciplinary research cooperation in Latino Studies. Bonilla served IUPLR as managing co-director from 1988 to 1993 and Executive Director from 1993 to 1995. He remained on IUPLR’s National Board of Advisors for several years following his retirement.

As director of IUPLR, Bonilla was the principal coordinator of the project entitled, Latinos in a Changing U.S. Economy. The multinational team he assembled tracked the impact of international, national, and regional forces in shaping labor force participation and earnings of Latinos in the U.S. He was one of the driving forces as well in convening the conference in northern Italy that brought together scholars, policy makers, and activists involved in analyzing the globalizing economic forces at the center of the “Latinization of the United States,” and the emerging political consequences and opportunities. Borderless Borders: U.S. Latinos, Latin Americans, and the Paradox of Interdependence (1998), co-edited by Bonilla, Edwin Meléndez, Rebecca Morales and María de los Angeles Torres, is the acclaimed product of the conference.

Additional Publications, Activities and Honors

Frank Bonilla was a prolific writer and advocate of collaborative research among scholars of the Latino diasporas. He wrote, edited, co-authored or co-edited dozens of books, monographs, articles for refereed journals, and chapters in edited books. He delivered papers internationally on human rights, minority experiences in the U.S., and research methodologies; encouraged cultural and educational exchange programs between the U.S. and Caribbean countries; and acted as confidant and critic to countless aspiring scholars and community organizers.

Among his many honors, Bonilla received the Distinguished Alumni Award from CCNY in 1972 and the Ralph C. Guzmán Award of the American Political Science Association in 1986 for Excellence in Scholarship and Service to the Profession. He was recognized by Mercy College in 1987 and by the University of Washington D.C. in 1993 as Doctor of Letters Honoris Causa, by Hunter College with the President’s Medal in 1993, and by the Council of Dominican Educators with its Service Award also in 1993. In 2003, he was the first recipient of the Public Intellectual Award of the Latino Studies Section of the Latin American Studies Association; and the Award was subsequently named after him.

Retirement, and Ongoing Intellectual and Political Concerns

Bonilla has been a central figure in his large, extended family. Among his three children, five grandchildren, great grandchild, siblings, and many nieces and nephews, he is known to cherish family gatherings and to give generously of his time to his loved ones. He spoke proudly of the “mosaic of kinship” in his family that depicted the “multiracial reality of Puerto Ricans and other Latinos as well as Afro-Americans that is now exploding in the U.S.” Though the passions that drove him to apply his intellectual talents to the pursuit of justice left Bonilla with little time for leisure, his recreational pastimes included swimming, fishing, biking, reading, and writing. For some years in the 1980s and 1990s, he enjoyed these pleasures at his home in Montauk, on the East End of Long Island, New York.

Though formally retired by the late 1990s, Bonilla continued to emphasize the importance of promoting Latino academic and policy research capabilities and bringing Latino voices and perspectives into the U.S. foreign policy arena. He remained an active member of many organizations and continued to publish and spearhead numerous initiatives well into the new millennium. He died after a long illness on December 28, 2010.