

Legacy of Frank Bonilla

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As we mourn the recent passing of Frank Bonilla, it is important to recognize and pay tribute to his towering place in the history of Puerto Rican and Latino Studies, and the magnitude of this contribution to the growth of a new field of research and analysis. In founding the Centro de Estudios Puertorriqueños in 1973, Frank's vision went beyond the introduction of relevant university courses and departments, the inclusion of more Puerto Rican students and faculty in the institutions of higher education, and even beyond the development of research on the various policy issues that affect the Puerto Rican community (though he, of course, wholeheartedly supported all of those valiant efforts). What made Frank special was that he recognized the need for and fought for the establishment of an intellectual space, a community of teachers, students, activists and cultural workers who would give voice to the perspective of the Puerto Rican diaspora itself.

This was a crucial and challenging struggle, with obstacles and adversaries on all sides. Prior to that historical turning-point of the early 1970s, most studies of the Puerto Rican community were conducted either by U.S. social scientists like Nathan Glazer and Oscar Lewis, who tended toward a "blame-the-victim" pathologizing of the experience, or professors and writers from Puerto Rico, whose elitist cultural nationalism made for a condescending and dismissive, if not outright racist attitude, toward New York Puerto Ricans. Eduardo Seda Bonilla's infamous "requiem for a culture" was just as racist as Oscar Lewis' "culture of poverty," and for remarkably similar reasons. With all its anti-colonial rhetoric, Manuel

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Maldonado-Denis' "emigration dialectic" leaned on the theoretically feeble and already outdated "assimilation" concepts of Milton Gordon.

Frank Bonilla was a pioneer in promoting an alternative to these distorted and demeaning approaches. He did so by bringing together students of the experience who could work with him in developing a structural and historical understanding of the Puerto Rican migration and the community's history in the United States. While always retaining collaborative relations with sympathetic established scholars from the United States, Latin America and Puerto Rico, his vision involved building a new generation of researchers and writers with roots in the New York setting, as had been his own formative experience. He chose to leave behind his prestigious academic career as a Latin Americanist to train his seasoned social scientific eye on the community in which he was born and raised, El Barrio.

I had the good fortune and privilege of working with Frank on this historic project since the earliest conceptualization of the institution when we were both professors (needless to say the only Puerto Ricans) at Stanford University in 1971-2. When we worked to apply Marxist theory and methods to the subject of Puerto Rico, the migration, and the community in the U.S., we were not interested in foisting an ideological doctrine on that lived experience but, very much in tune with the intellectual and political tenor of the times, in placing the subject of analysis in the framework of the structural and historical conditions that shaped that experience.

U.S. imperialism and the fight against colonialism were, of course, the central axis of analysis, but we wanted to bring to the fore the complex interplay of class, racial and gender relations which gave concrete shape to the migration and attendant community realities. Most important, we sought to gain and project an accurate "from within" understanding the particularities of a social experience that was both Puerto Rican and "from here" at the same time.

This was before the term "diaspora" existed in scholarly or everyday speech, and when ideas of "hybrid" cultural life were in their infancy and still difficult for anyone to wrap their minds around. It was all either "assimilation" or "cultural genocide." "Nuyorican" was still no more than a derogatory usage purveyed by the Island elite.

By working together and daring to pose new questions in new ways, the intellectual community around the Centro in those early years was able to forge alternative visions and identify uncharted lines of analysis that have influenced the debate ever since. Frank Bonilla was the primary instigator and catalyst of that momentous effort from the beginning. May he rest in peace and may his unique contribution be given the tribute it so richly deserves.

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