

Cuban Counterpoint

TOBACCO AND SUGAR

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On Cuban Counterpoint



THE preceding essay is of a schematic nature. It makes no attempt to exhaust the subject, nor does it claim that the economic, social, and historical contrasts pointed out between the two great products of Cuban industry are all as absolute and clear-cut as they would sometimes appear. The historic evolution of economic-social phenomena is extremely complex, and the variety of factors that determine them cause them to vary greatly in the course of their development; at times there are similarities that make them appear identical; at times the differences make them seem completely opposed. Nevertheless, fundamentally the contrasts I have pointed out do exist.

The ideas outlined in this work and the facts upon which they are based could be substantiated by full and systematic documentation in the form of notes; but in view of the nature of the work I have preferred to add some supplementary chapters. They deal with a basic theme of their own, but bear upon certain fundamental aspects of "Cuban Counterpoint" and will be of interest to readers who care to go deeper into the subject.

On the Social Phenomenon of "Transculturation" and Its Importance in Cuba



With the reader's permission, especially if he happens to be interested in ethnographic and sociological questions, I am going to take the liberty of employing for the first time the term *transculturation*, fully aware of the fact that it is a neologism. And I venture to suggest that it might be adopted in sociological terminology, to a great extent at least, as a substitute for the term *acculturation*, whose use is now spreading.

Acculturation is used to describe the process of transition from one culture to another, and its manifold social repercussions. But *transculturation* is a more fitting term.

I have chosen the word *transculturation* to express the highly varied phenomena that have come about in Cuba as a result of the extremely complex transmutations of culture that have taken place here, and without a knowledge of which it is impossible to understand the evolution of the Cuban folk, either in the economic or in the institutional, legal, ethical, religious, artistic, linguistic, psychological, sexual, or other aspects of its life.

The real history of Cuba is the history of its intermeshed transculturations. First came the transculturation of the paleolithic Indian to the neolithic, and the disappearance of the latter because of his inability to adjust himself to the culture brought in by the Spaniards. Then the transculturation of an unbroken stream of white immigrants. They were Spaniards, but representatives of different cultures and themselves torn loose, to use the phrase of the time, from the Iberian Peninsula groups and transplanted to a New World, where everything was new to them, nature and people, and where they had to readjust themselves to a new syncretism of cultures. At the same time there was going on the transculturation of a steady human stream of African Negroes coming from all the coastal regions of Africa along the Atlantic, from Senegal, Guinea, the Congo, and Angola and as far away as Mozambique on the opposite shore of that continent. All of them snatched from their original social groups, their own cultures destroyed and crushed under the weight of the cultures in existence here, like sugar cane ground in the rollers of the mill. And still other immigrant cultures of the most varying origins arrived, either in sporadic waves or a continuous flow, always exerting an influence and being influenced in turn: Indians from the mainland, Jews, Portuguese, Anglo-Saxons, French, North Americans, even yellow Mongoloids from Macao, Canton, and other regions of the sometime Celestial Kingdom. And each of them torn from his native moorings, faced with the problem of disadjustment and readjustment, of deculturation and acculturation—in a word, of transculturation.

Among all peoples historical evolution has always meant a

vital change from one culture to another at tempos varying from gradual to sudden. But in Cuba the cultures that have influenced the formation of its folk have been so many and so diverse in their spatial position and their structural composition that this vast blend of races and cultures overshadows in importance every other historical phenomenon. Even economic phenomena, the most basic factors of social existence, in Cuba are almost always conditioned by the different cultures. In Cuba the terms Ciboney, Taino, Spaniard, Jew, English, French, Anglo-American, Negro, Yucatec, Chinese, and Creole do not mean merely the different elements that go into the make-up of the Cuban nation, as expressed by their different indications of origin. Each of these has come to mean in addition the synthetic and historic appellation of one of the various economies and cultures that have existed in Cuba successively and even simultaneously, at times giving rise to the most terrible clashes. We have only to recall that described by Bartolomé de las Casas as the "destruction of the Indies."

The whole gamut of culture run by Europe in a span of more than four millenniums took place in Cuba in less than four centuries. In Europe the change was step by step; here it was by leaps and bounds. First there was the culture of the Ciboneys and the Guanajabibes, the paleolithic culture, our stone age. Or, to be more exact, our age of stone and wood, of unpolished stone and rough wood, and of sea shells and fish bones, which were like stones and thorns of the sea.

After this came the culture of the Taino Indians, which was neolithic. This was the age of polished stone and carved wood. With the Tainos came agriculture, a sedentary as opposed to a nomadic existence, abundance, tribal chieftains, or caciques, and priests. They entered as conquerers and imposed the first transculturation. The Ciboneys became serfs, *naborias*, or fled to the hills and jungles, to the *cibaos* and *caonaos*. Then came a hurricane of culture: Europe. There arrived together, and in mass, iron, gunpowder, the horse, the wheel, the sail, the compass, money, wages, writing, the printing-press, books, the master, the King, the Church, the banker. . . . A revolutionary upheaval shook the Indian peoples of Cuba, tearing up their institutions by the roots and destroying their lives. At one bound the bridge between the drowsing stone ages and the

wide-awake Renaissance was spanned. In a single day various of the intervening ages were crossed in Cuba; one might say thousands of "culture-years," if such measurement were admissible in the chronology of peoples. If the Indies of America were a New World for the Europeans, Europe was a far newer world for the people of America. They were two worlds that discovered each other and collided head-on. The impact of the two on each other was terrible. One of them perished, as though struck by lightning. It was a transculturation that failed as far as the natives were concerned, and was profound and cruel for the new arrivals. The aboriginal human basis of society was destroyed in Cuba, and it was necessary to bring in a complete new population, both masters and servants. This is one of the strange social features of Cuba, that since the sixteenth century all its classes, races, and cultures, coming in by will or by force, have all been exogenous and have all been torn from their places of origin, suffering the shock of this first uprooting and a harsh transplanting.

With the white men came the culture of Spain, and together with the Castilians, Andalusians, Portuguese, Galicians, Basques, and Catalonians. It could be called a crosscut of the Iberian culture of the white Pyrenean subrace. And in the first waves of immigration came Genoese, Florentines, Jews, Levantines, and Berbers—that is to say, representatives of the Mediterranean culture, an age-old mixture of peoples, cultures, and pigmentation, from the ruddy Normans to the sub-Sahara Negroes. Some of the white men brought with them a feudal economy, conquerors in search of loot and peoples to subjugate and make serfs of; while others, white too, were urged on by mercantile and even industrial capitalism, which was already in its early stages of development. And so various types of economy came in, confused with each other and in a state of transition, to set themselves up over other types, different and intermingled too, but primitive and impossible of adaptation to the needs of the white men at that close of the Middle Ages. The mere fact of having crossed the sea had changed their outlook; they left their native lands ragged and penniless and arrived as lords and masters; from the lowly in their own country they became converted into the mighty in that of others. And all of them, warriors, friars, merchants, peasants, came in search of

adventure, cutting their links with an old society to graft themselves on another, new in climate, in people, in food, customs, and hazards. All came with their ambitions fixed on the goal of riches and power to be achieved here, and with the idea of returning to their native land to enjoy the fruits of their labors in their declining years. That is to say, the undertaking was to be bold, swift, and temporary, a parabolic curve whose beginning and end lay in a foreign land, and whose intersection through this country was only for the purpose of betterment.

There was no more important human factor in the evolution of Cuba than these continuous, radical, contrasting geographic transmigrations, economic and social, of the first settlers, this perennial transitory nature of their objectives, and their unstable life in the land where they were living, in perpetual disharmony with the society from which they drew their living. Men, economies, cultures, ambitions were all foreigners here, provisional, changing, "birds of passage" over the country, at its cost, against its wishes, and without its approval.

With the whites came the Negroes, first from Spain, at that time full of slaves from Guinea and the Congo, and then directly from all the Dark Continent. They brought with them their diverse cultures, some as primitive as that of the Ciboneys, others in a state of advanced barbarism like that of the Tainos, and others more economically and socially developed, like the Mandingas, Yolofes (Wolofs), Hausas, Dahomeyans, and Yorubas, with agriculture, slaves, money, markets, trade, and centralized governments ruling territories and populations as large as Cuba; intermediate cultures between the Taino and the Aztec, with metals, but as yet without writing.

The Negroes brought with their bodies their souls, but not their institutions nor their implements. They were of different regions, races, languages, cultures, classes, ages, sexes, thrown promiscuously into the slave ships, and socially equalized by the same system of slavery. They arrived deracinated, wounded, shattered, like the cane of the fields, and like it they were ground and crushed to extract the juice of their labor. No other human element has had to suffer such a profound and repeated change of surroundings, cultures, class, and conscience. They were transferred from their own to another more advanced cul-

ture, like that of the Indians; but the Indians suffered their fate in their native land, believing that when they died they passed over to the invisible regions of their own Cuban world. The fate of the Negroes was far more cruel; they crossed the ocean in agony, believing that even after death they would have to recross it to be resurrected in Africa with their lost ancestors. The Negroes were torn from another continent, as were the whites; but not of their own will or choice, and forced to leave their free and easy tribal ways to eat the bitter bread of slavery, whereas the white man, who may have set out from his native land in despair, arrived in the Indies in a frenzy of hope, converted into master and authority. The Indians and the Spaniards had the support and comfort of their families, their kinfolk, their leaders, and their places of worship in their sufferings; the Negroes found none of this. They, the most uprooted of all, were herded together like animals in a pen, always in a state of impotent rage, always filled with a longing for flight, freedom, change, and always having to adopt a defensive attitude of submission, pretense, and acculturation to a new world. Under these conditions of mutilation and social amputation, thousands and thousands of human beings were brought to Cuba year after year and century after century from continents beyond the sea. To a greater or lesser degree whites and Negroes were in the same state of dissociation in Cuba. All, those above and those below, living together in the same atmosphere of terror and oppression, the oppressed in terror of punishment, the oppressor in terror of reprisals, all beside justice, beside adjustment, beside themselves. And all in the painful process of transculturation.

After the Negroes began the influx of Jews, French, Anglo-Saxons, Chinese, and peoples from the four quarters of the globe. They were all coming to a new world, all on the way to a more or less rapid process of transculturation.

I am of the opinion that the word *transculturation* better expresses the different phases of the process of transition from one culture to another because this does not consist merely in acquiring another culture, which is what the English word *acculturation* really implies, but the process also necessarily involves the loss or uprooting of a previous culture, which could be defined as a deculturation. In addition it carries the idea of

the consequent creation of new cultural phenomena, which could be called neoculturation. In the end, as the school of Malinowski's followers maintains, the result of every union of cultures is similar to that of the reproductive process between individuals: the offspring always has something of both parents but is always different from each of them.

These questions of sociological nomenclature are not to be disregarded in the interests of a better understanding of social phenomena, especially in Cuba, whose history, more than that of any other country of America, is an intense, complex, unbroken process of transculturation of human groups, all in a state of transition. The concept of transculturation is fundamental and indispensable for an understanding of the history of Cuba, and, for analogous reasons, of that of America in general. But this is not the moment to go into this theme at length, which will be considered in another work in progress dealing with the effects on Cuba of the transculturations of Indians, whites, Negroes, and Mongols.

When the proposed neologism, *transculturation*, was submitted to the unimpeachable authority of Bronislaw Malinowski, the great figure in contemporary ethnography and sociology, it met with his instant approbation. Under his eminent sponsorship, I have no qualms about putting the term into circulation.

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Concerning Tobacco Seed

There is something marvelous even about the unusual number of seeds produced by tobacco. This was one of the reasons for its rapid spread in all lands, once the Spaniards found the plant in America and succumbed to its temptation.

The seeds of tobacco are incredibly numerous and very tiny. There are from 300,000 to 400,000 to an ounce. One ounce of seed could theoretically produce 300,000 plants. Each tobacco plant can yield as many as a million seeds, according to William George Freeman. Each of these little seeds in turn could pro-