

# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Aline Helg. *Our Rightful Share: The Afro-Cuban Struggle for Equality, 1886-1912*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995. \$45.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8078-2184-8; \$32.50 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8078-4494-6.

Reviewed by Paul Figueroa (University of Alberta)  
Published on H-LatAm (June, 1995)



## The Sharing of Cuba or the Whole Lechon?

This is an extensive elaboration of “Afro-Cuban Protest: The Partido Independiente de Color, 1908-1912,” *Cuban Studies* (1991) v.21 [101]-121, which was based on research work done “in Cuba and at the Benson Latin American Collection,” (“Protest”, 116). The “rightful share” of the title is apparently a contemporary quotation (“Protest,” 105; Share, 10) and refers to a demand for more government jobs for blacks on the basis that they had contributed overwhelmingly to the rebel armies (59); and more broadly, the struggle of black Cubans “to be recognized as equal to whites in theory, in politics and in real life.” (2, 10).

The bibliographical apparatus of *Our Rightful Share* is impressive and includes archival sources in Cuba, Spain, the United States and elsewhere. Extensive use was made of the various *Diarios de Sesiones* of Congress between 1906 and 1920. Three pages of titles of newspapers and periodicals of the period are listed.

Helg sets out to show how Cuban blacks and mulattoes were kept down through discrimination even after independence. She takes as her central incident the “armed protest” (194, 224) of the Partido Independiente de Color in May, 1912. This political party for blacks, the first Cuban one ever built on ethnic lines (for other attempts, see 240), had an extremely poor showing in its first and only election in 1908 (Suchlicki, *Cuba from Columbus to Castro*, 61). Frustration was exacerbated when Congress, in 1912, through the Morua Amendment to the Electoral Reform Law 1910, made ethnic political

parties illegal. The revolt and pillaging which followed prompted President Jose Miguel Gomez to fear another U.S. intervention—the Marines actually landed—and the Cuban army was ordered to put down the revolt. “Thousands” (194) were killed. Estimates ran from 2,000 to 6,000 ( 225).

The narrative of events from abolition to the massacre is very detailed and replete with contemporary quotations. Some newspaper cartoons of the period are used. Many of the quotations and the cartoons are probably reprinted for the first time. Analysis is detailed and commentary on the quotations is extensive. A fair amount of statistical information is used, but not as complete as one would have liked: the difficulty is probably their scarcity and the difficulty of comparing disparate categories.

The author pursues various themes, including the “myth of racial equality” (see 6 for the author’s definition). Although Helg argues polemically (6-16), and takes on Louis A. Perez, whom she finds “challenging” (10), she does not present convincing evidence. Whether it is reasonable to say that such a “myth” existed remains a controversial topic.

Closely related to the above, but not fully treated, is the important topic of the class distribution of whites, blacks and mulattoes throughout the society. We know in general terms that whites were found at all levels, from labourers and guajiros all the way up to the social pinnacles. Blacks and mulattoes were also widely distributed, though numerically heavy at the lower end and sparse

at the upper reaches. This is an essential concern, given the scope of her book. Once again, sketchy statistical information is probably the stumbling block. (Schroeder, *Cuba: A Handbook of Historical statistics*, 50, etc., which is not cited in her sources, contains some relevant data).

The author's enthusiastic defense of the blacks leads at times to a notable difference in her treatment of blacks and whites. The following quotation, which has a mythic dimension of its own, is from a letter to a black newspaper, *Prevision*. She characterizes it as "self-esteem":

Let us stand aloof from the alien, let us shut up in ourselves, let us make a circle, reconcentrate in it, and gather our race in its center. Let us make a stoic, strong, absorbing race; let us imitate the Jewish people, they are self-sufficient... Black comes before everything.

151 (Last sentence italicized in original.)

On the other hand, the following descriptive words are routinely used in reference to the whites: "racist", "intolerant", "slander," "prejudice", "cynical", "Machiavelian" and "stereotyping." (71, 33, 51, 54, 184, 50, 112).

More seriously, a narrow focus on the target groups, blacks and mulattoes, involves a certain contextual and methodological problem. We are told, for instance, that in 1907 "of 1,240 physicians and surgeons only 9 were Afro-Cuban and of 1,347 lawyers, only 4 were." She concludes: "...because their [blacks' and mulattoes'] access to the university had been virtually prohibited by racial discrimination [*italics added, virtually-discrimination*], they were excluded from the most prestigious professions" (100).

Two questions suggest themselves. Firstly, what was the situation in other countries at the time; for example, in the sister country of Venezuela, already independent for 80 odd years? How many medical doctors did they have in comparison with their population and how were these distributed in whole numbers and as percentages of the constituent elements of the country, (in the case of Venezuela: foreigners, Indians, mestizos, mulattoes, blacks, and native whites)? Similar questions need to be asked for the United States, especially: how many black doctors did they have in 1907? We should glance at the British Empire too: how many black doctors were there in Nigeria in 1907? In Jamaica? In South Africa? Indeed, how many Hispanic physicians were there in California in 1907?

The second set of questions has to do with Cuba itself.

Of the 1,231 white physicians, how many were Spanish, elite creoles, middle-class whites, urban working-class whites and guajiros? It is quite probable that such detailed statistics and analyses are not easy to come by, but the question has to be asked, and the answer strenuously sought. It might turn out that urban working-class whites and guajiros were as unlikely to become physicians as lower-class blacks and mulattoes. The dimensions of limited economic growth, the ravages of war, social immobility and stratification, and unequal access to education are impediments which might have to be added to the one on which the author lays principal stress: racial discrimination. In any case, on the basis of the evidence offered, the conclusion drawn needs qualification.

The author does however deal at some length with the closely related topic of improved social mobility of blacks and mulattoes during the period under study (32, 47, 61, 130, etc.) and in 1919 (243).

Another type of problem can be exemplified by a curious reference to Liborio, the guajiro character who personifies Cuba. Here is what Helg says of him:

Rather than acknowledging the African contribution to Cubanity, Cuba's first national opera, *Yumuri*, was inspired by aboriginal themes and Italian music. Simultaneously [...] the mainstream newspapers promoted the character of Liborio –a thin, short, white, guajiro (peasant) with sideburns and a mustache– as the typical Cuban. [...] The construction of the Cuban national identity as white and Latin corresponded to the Western ideal of white supremacy but contrasted sharply with Cuban history."

(105).

This is the only reference to guajiro small-farmers in the book; except for cartoons (152, 155). Like the blacks, they became established as a major element in the society from the earliest days of the colony. Although they never suffered the indignity of slavery, they were, nevertheless, disadvantaged. Being mostly white, they would have made an excellent control group for the purpose of distinguishing between social and racial barriers in the society. This is significant, because Helg's purpose is to counter the view that "class" rather than "race" was the principal problem.

The author does achieve her purpose in *Our Rightful Share*: a detailed history and spirited defense of blacks and mulattoes at the turn of the century. It certainly has a place in research and specialist libraries, notwithstanding the concerns raised here.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-latam>

**Citation:** Paul Figueroa. Review of Helg, Aline, *Our Rightful Share: The Afro-Cuban Struggle for Equality, 1886-1912*. H-LatAm, H-Net Reviews. June, 1995.

**URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=80>

Copyright © 1995 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at [hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu](mailto:hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu).