
Black Political Activism and the Cuban Republic analyzes the racial politics and culture of black civic and political activists during the Cuban Republic of 1902-1958. Based on research in U.S. and Cuban libraries and archives, it focuses principally on black social clubs, relying on their publications and the Afro-Cuban press.

Melina Pappademos proposes to go beyond studies of Cuban racial binaries and to destabilize “race as a static, analytical category by recovering the many ways black Cuban activism challenged misrepresentations of black life” (p. 11). To do so, she brings in class, ethnicity, cultural practices, and gender. She also aims at “decentering nationalism as the principal frame for understanding racial politics and black activism” and at “excavating the multiple social and political communities that blacks created within the larger system of republic” (p. 10).

Her book builds on and dialogues with the existing literature. Carefully referenced, it begins with an examination of Cuba’s early republican structures, which combined liberal democratic institutions with patron-client relations and maintained colonial racial hierarchies simultaneously with claims of social egalitarianism. Chapter 2 analyzes how black political elites managed to enter the formal political bipartisan structures at the local level, gaining limited access to republican resources. Next, Pappademos focuses on black political heterogeneity and coalition building by examining alternative Afro-Cuban civic communities that questioned the “civilization” discourse of black political elites. She shows how “Africanist” mutual aid societies continued to claim relationships with distinct African ethnic identities without adhering to notions of “African atavisms” as threats to Cuban modernity.

Chapter 4 discusses the writings by Afro-Cuban intellectuals, such as Rafael Serra and Juan Gualberto Gómez, on blacks in the construction of the Cuban nation. These journalists attempted to promote black integration in the body politic at a time of racial determinism, advocating bourgeois mores and rejecting the “African atavisms” displayed in the social practices of many Afro-Cubans. Yet Serra also denounced structural racism and social inequalities a dimension of his discourse unfortunately not mentioned here.
Chapter 5 covers the mid-1910s to the Revolution of 1933, when black club leaders increased agitation for access to republican resources. Around 1933, new organizations such as unions, student associations, and the People’s Socialist (later Communist) Party challenged the old system. Nationalism and populism shook arrangements between black clubs and mainstream white politicians, and fully revealed class tensions among Afro-Cubans. The final chapter, subtitled “Political Change and Challenges to the Black Political Elite,” examines this turbulent period, but also returns to the corrupt dictatorial administration of President Gerardo Machado (1925-1933) and the antiblack violence of 1919. The mixing of these periods tends to be confusing and to mitigate the argument that change indeed took place. Moreover, the primacy of patron-client relations in Cuban politics involved black clubs as well as other organizations, such as the People’s Socialist Party (p. 200), and continued under Fulgencio Batista in the 1940s and 1950s.

The book includes illustrations, principally portraits of Afro-Cuban leaders. Yet one figure provides more than a face to a name. The cover of the first issue of the elite Afro-Cuban review, Labor Nueva, dated February 20, 1916, displays a regrettably illegible letter from white President Mario G. Menocal calling on “blacks to work toward Cuban racial harmony and greater black civic responsibility” (p. 154). That the tiny black elite needed the endorsement of the president of the republic to launch a “revista literaria ilustrada” reveals the narrow margin left for “black political activism” a few years after the 1912 massacre by the Cuban army of thousands of men, women, and children chiefly because they were black.

Throughout her study, Pappademos shows that in republican Cuba black political activism was only partially motivated by race. Yet she does not explain why in Cuba, unlike in any other Latin American society, individuals of African descent did or had to?—join in a variety of black clubs, called “sociedades de la raza de color” until the revolution initiated by Fidel Castro. Although she recognizes Cuba’s entrenched racism, she doesn’t dig into its roots. Indeed, Cuban planters were the last ones in the hemisphere to import African slaves after 1852, and only with the Ten Years’ War (1868-1878) did some elite white Cubans begin to think of the island’s people of African descent as Cubans (of color). Under the republic, the 1912 massacre and its racist justification were cruel reminders of Cuba’s racial divide. They help to explain subsequent Afro-Cuban discrete political strategies.