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Orestes Ferrara
By Lincoln Diaz-Balart

I was very pleased to learn that my friend Orestes Matacena was preparing a website on his great-uncle, the great Cuban statesman Orestes Ferrara.

I admire the historic figure of Orestes Ferrara. I am one of his "favorable friends of tomorrow" to whom he makes reference at the end of his autobiography, which he titled "Memoirs – A Look at Three Centuries". ("The 19th century gave me a great push toward the great space that separates hope from accomplishment; the 20th has formed me in the battle between good and evil; and the new winds that can be felt of the approaching 21st are giving me the sedative to enjoy a tranquility without aspirations" he wrote in 1968, at age 92.)

To recommend the reading of Ferrara's memoirs is to suggest a continuous reencounter with wisdom through the experiences of an exceptional life, of a genius who was motivated by a deep love for Cuba and for freedom. Orestes Ferrara was born in Naples, Italy, in 1876. His grandfather had fought for Italian unity. His father, Eduardo Ferrara, had fought alongside Garibaldi. Orestes Ferrara was a student of law when he decided to go to Cuba to fight for its independence, after learning of the commencement of the war organized by the apostle of Cuba's liberty, José Martí. The young man in love with freedom arrived in Cuba in 1896. He soon met Salvador Cisneros Betancourt, president of the Republic in Arms. In the fight for freedom in Cuba's jungles, due to his brilliance and his heroism, Ferrara became a Colonel in the liberation army, and he became an aide to Major General (subsequently the second president of the Republic) José Miguel Gómez.

He completed his law studies in Havana. Still very young, he became professor of political law at the University of Havana. In the election of 1908, when José Miguel Gómez was elected President, Ferrara was elected to the House of Representatives, and his colleagues elected him Speaker of the House.

The study of Ferrara's life is soaked in lessons. Beginning with the first governments of the Republic, former "autonomistas" (supporters of Cuban autonomy within a continuation of Spanish rule), who along with "guerrilleros" and "voluntarios" (loyalist extremists) had fought against the Cuban independence movement, enjoyed

ministerial posts and ambassadorships in the governments of the Republic. Many of the former “mambises” (fighters for independence), on the other hand, felt marginalized in their own homeland. The few independence movement leaders who had possessed fortunes had lost them through expropriations by the Spanish government. Those fortunes were never returned to them or to their descendants. The Republic began with the economic power in the hands of those who had fought against the Republic, and with its founding fathers in poverty. Blacks and mulattos, who had probably been a majority of the army of liberation (Manuel Maza Miquel, in his important book, “Between Ideology and Compassion” (1997), indicates that in many cases blacks and mulattos constituted up to 85% of the insurgent troops during both wars of independence), felt more alienated than anyone else within their own homeland. As explained by Gastón Baquero in his impressive work “The Black Man in Cuba” (1974), many of the former fighters for independence were able to begin to obtain strength within their own country only by way of politics.

During the administration of José Miguel Gómez, Orestes Ferrara was sent by the Cuban President to Washington to avoid a second U.S. intervention in the Cuban Republic, motivated this time by fear of the uprising by general Ivonet and captain Estenoz, both ex-officers of the army of independence, and black men. The avoidance of that already - practically - decided U.S. intervention required all of Ferrara’s diplomatic ability. The race problem, the existence during both colonial rule and the Republic of an unacceptable and unjust racial discrimination, the way in which that discrimination deepened the alienation of Cuba’s fighters for independence (and their descendants) within the country that they themselves had created, the economic power of the Republic in the hands of former autonomists and other profoundly anti-Republic elements, and the relation of these factors to the rise to absolute power of a (white) son of a soldier of Valeriano Weyler’s Spanish army of occupation, who hates and has enslaved the Cuban people, this, to this day, (with the exception of the already mentioned article by Gastón Baquero) has not been studied.

Orestes Ferrara, as his good friend, House colleague and later President of the Constituent Assembly of 1940, another great Cuban, Carlos Márquez Sterling wrote, was, even “more than a man of politics, a man of study. His love of freedom, in the liberal tradition of the 19th century, was his doctrine. Talent, valor, audacity, tact, prudence, an adventurous spirit, idealism, realism, romanticism, dexterity, ability. A sense of limit. A diverse knowledge. An immense culture. He spoke several languages, and he had a “knowledge of how to do things,” (“*savoir faire*”) that was never surpassed by his contemporaries.”

Ferrara was a lawyer for large multinational corporations, the author of multiple books, Minister of Foreign Affairs, Cuban Ambassador to the United States, Cuban Ambassador to Spain and to UNESCO, a member of the Constituent Assembly of 1940, where his conduct gives us another idea of his love for Cuba. Ferrara had returned to Cuba from exile after having been elected a member of the assembly that would write the Constitution of 1940. He knew that his life was in danger, but his sense of duty, as usual, outweighed all other factors for him. Several days after returning to Cuba, he was the

victim of an attempt on his life, where his driver was killed. After two months in the hospital in very serious condition, he returned to the constitutional convention "with my arm and back heavily bandaged," the Constitution already practically finalized. If he had been able to participate in the majority of the sessions, "I would have fought to cancel, or at least diminish the "state worship" of the project. But, the eternal but, I had to favor the project instead of fighting it. Even opining against the document as written, necessity put me in its favor."

Integrity and character are in evidence throughout Ferrara's fascinating life. When he believed that he had made a mistake, he would admit it. He explains, for example, how he had been wrong in opposing the important public works planned and carried out by the Minister of Public Works of President Machado during the decade of the 1920s, Carlos Miguel de Céspedes.

To study Ferrara is not only to study history for real, but also to learn political philosophy. To learn, for example, of "the unity of religion and politics, since both are spontaneous expressions of human cooperation," or how "all our evils have stemmed from reelectionism."

But, above all, to study Ferrara is to study the love for Cuba in action. In his memoirs we see how, at the end of his days, once again in exile, "I have remained outside of Cuba. I could have regained my Italian nationality, I have not, nor will I. At the age of 92 I wait erect and respected for victory to smile upon those who deserve it, and for ineptitude to finally disappear from the government of my country. I remain a Cuban in bad times as in good ones. I have the same faith in Cuba that I had in the lush fields of the island."

Ineptitude, manifested today in its most brutal and inhumane form, will disappear from government in Cuba. And Cuba will never forget Orestes Ferrara.