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Greg Grandin

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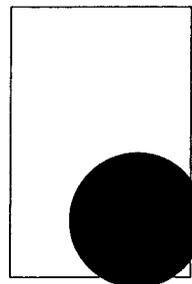
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Review article

Revolution and the solution of ethnographic embrace

A discussion concerning Ada Ferrer's *Insurgent Cuba: Race, Nation, and Revolution, 1868–1898* and Charles Hale's *Resistance and Contradiction: Miskitu Indians and the Nicaraguan State, 1894–1987*

Greg Grandin
New York University

Despite the longstanding engagement between the disciplines of anthropology and history, Sherry Ortner in 1995 still noted a certain 'ethnographic refusal' in studies concerned with resistance. The inability of scholars interested in oppositional politics to fully commit to ethnographic method, according to Ortner, took three forms. First, there exists in much if not most work an inclination to 'sanitize politics', which often entails focusing exclusively on relations between the dominated and dominating while glossing over contradictions and conflicts along, for example, gender, ethnic, or class lines, among those doing the resisting. The 'lack of an adequate sense of prior and ongoing politics *among* subalterns', Ortner writes, 'must inevitably contribute to an inadequate analysis of resistance itself' in the sense that it will yield shallow catchall explanations such as 'fear', 'collaboration', or 'enthrallment' to account for the fact that many, if not most, people do not actively participate in resistance movements (Ortner, 1995: 179). Second, either influenced by a critical materialism or a postmodern refutation of the 'authentic', many investigations into oppositional politics, 'thin culture' and, notwithstanding gestures toward a supposed unspecified 'religiosity' of popular classes, shy away from interpreting how cultural ideas shape, inform, and drive oppositional politics (Ortner here singles out James Scott's influential work, p.180). Finally, Ortner criticizes a trend among some scholars (who reacted in some cases to what Ortner herself earlier criticized as a monolithic, romantic notion of subaltern agency) to 'dissolve the subject' in a solution of discursive 'subject effects'. While introducing 'complexity, ambiguity, and contradiction', such postmodern positioning does away with the very subject of oppositional politics. The paradox is obvious: 'Since these writers are still concerned

with subalternity in some sense', notes Ortner, 'they themselves wind up in incoherent positions with respect to resistance' (p. 183).

To put it simply, Ortner here identifies a tension between, on the one hand, a need to complicate oppositional subjectivity and politics and, on the other hand, not letting that complexity so dilute the concept of resistance that it undercuts both the possibility of analyzing the meaning of political action in subaltern life and the consequences such meaning and action have to larger national and international realms. The apparent impossibility of resolving such tensions has led some scholars, from diverse and not always complementary standpoints, to either disown the sociological relevance of 'resistance' or downplay its experiential significance in the lives of popular actors. Yet in the case of Latin America, to summarily dismiss the importance of resistance, not to mention its closely related cousins revolution and counter-revolution, would be to further marginalize the lived experience of a great many of the continent's most marginalized people who participated in nearly a century-and-a-half of insurgent and counterinsurgent action. The two books to be discussed here – Ada Ferrer's *Insurgent Cuba: Race, Nation, and Revolution, 1868–1898* (1999) and Charles Hale's *Resistance and Contradiction: Miskitu Indians and the Nicaraguan State, 1894–1987* (1994) – fulfil Ortner's call for a more ethnographic examination of resistance, particularly in terms of race and ethnicity. Both Ferrer, an historian, and Hale, an anthropologist, explore the relationship of, respectively, race and ethnicity to revolution, or to be more exact, to the success and failure of revolution. Yet beyond providing a more thickly described account of politics, culture, and subjectivity, the two authors grapple, implicitly or explicitly, with the dilemma identified earlier. That dilemma is: how does one acknowledge *both* the inexistence of the autonomous self or revolutionary actor, which also involves the rejection of attendant notions of intent (for many, a primary requisite of 'resistance') *and* the existence of multiple, overlapping realms of power, meaning, and subjectivity (which sometimes leads subalterns to oppose revolutionary change or revolutionaries to promote decidedly unprogressive sentiments and actions) without undermining the ground on which one could take a political stand?

Ada Ferrer's *Insurgent Cuba* is a history of one of the most remarkable, and remarkably understudied, revolutions to take place in Latin America. While most Spanish American provinces gained their independence from Spain in the early 19th century, Cuba's slave-owning sugar planters, faced with the possibility of become the hemisphere's second 'black republic' after Haiti, opted to stay colonial. Yet as the century dragged on, uneven capitalist development and diversification, particularly in the island's east, led local elites in 1868 to launch a 30-year insurgent war against the 'four-hundred year-old Spanish empire' (p. 1). What was extraordinary about this movement is that it took place in a world increasingly, in the words of Cuba's poet-revolutionary José Martí, 'under Darwin's sway'. As 'scientists weighed skulls and as white mobs in the US South lynched blacks', Ferrer writes, Cuba's rebels not only built a multi-racial army in which 'people of color' held rank over soldiers considered white, but also developed a nationalism that affirmed the equality of men and denied the very existence of race (p. 195). Unlike the mestizo nationalisms of other ethnically-diverse Latin American countries, Cuban rebels imagined national identity as emerging not from biological miscegenation but through 'joint political action by armed black, mulatto, and white men fighting in a war against the colonizer' (p. 4).

Ferrer's book weaves together in one piece what has previously been treated, at least in US historiography, as fragmented movements and uprisings (including the Ten-Year War, 1868–1878; the Little War, 1879–1880; and the final insurrection, 1895–1898). Part of the reason for the revolution's invisibility lies in its quietus: the US's 1898 invasion suddenly interrupted the insurgency's foreseeable victory, thus claiming credit for ending the last vestige of Spanish colonialism in the Americas. The revolution and its radical democratic politics were rendered invisible. Yet the revolution's anonymity, writes Ferrer, is also to be explained by its celebration in Cuba, where it is taken by official historiography as the uncriticized precursor to Castro's 1959 triumph:

Thirty years of conspiracies organized and betrayed, of alliances made and broken, of courses altered and modified, became simply an abstract – though admittedly rousing – tale of a People's struggle for a Nation. Thus the obscurity around anti-colonial insurgency, imposed initially by the contempt and arrogance of empire, remains in many ways unchallenged by the romance and teleology of nationalist narratives. (p. 7)

The brilliance of Ferrer's study rests in her ability to tack back and forth between race as discourse and race as ethnographic experience, exposing the relations that connect and transform the two spheres. Needing to win over both slave owners and slaves to their cause, the rebel-planters who started Cuba's independence movement at first issued a moderate call for gradual and remunerated abolition of the institution of slavery. Yet as fighting spread, events quickly escaped their control:

Modest promises of eventual freedom drew an ever increasing number of slaves to the insurrection; their participation then pushed leaders to do more about abolition. But then the closer leaders came to the emancipation of slaves, the more slaves joined. And the more slaves joined, the more urgent and central they made the issue of abolition. The result, then, was an almost infinite and two-way circle of slave and insurgent initiatives and responses leading – gradually and fitfully – to a speedier and more thorough emancipation than leaders envisioned at the outset. (p. 27)

After a decade of vast destruction, the movement for liberation had become something much more than what its original planter plotters imagined. The white rebel leadership negotiated with Spanish authorities a measure of political autonomy and freedom for slaves who participated in the rebellion while leaving intact Spanish colonial rule and slavery. Antonio Maceo, a mulatto smallholder who represented the 'emergence of a powerful black and mulatto leadership' within the insurgent army, rejected the settlement and continued the war.

Race became the language of revolution and counter-revolution. The white liberals who initiated the movement for independence in 1868 and negotiated its settlement in 1878 increasingly distanced themselves from the blacks, mulattos and white radical democrats who sought to continue the war until abolition and independence were won. In order to counter the insurgency, colonial officials raised racial fears and rehearsed arguments about the 'impossibility of Cuban nationhood', invoked race war, and referenced Haiti. In response, 'patriot-intellectuals' countered by reformulating 'nationality,

blackness, and the place of people of color in the would-be nation. In the process, black, mulatto, and white intellectuals constructed powerful and eloquent expressions of raceless nationality, of a nationality that had anti-racism as a solid foundation' (p. 9). It was an extraordinary rejection of late-19th-century race nationalism and, in a sense, a return to a Rousseauian concept of patriotism defined by virtuous action in defense of liberty.

Ferrer's account demonstrates just how plastic *and* rigid race was. On the one hand, Spanish officials contrived to make the insurgency look 'blacker' than it was – they manipulated lists of captives and 'omitted the names of white rebels'; they made 'surrendering white insurgents sign public declarations repudiating the allegedly racial goals of black co-leaders' (p. 80). For their part, pro-independence writers, in order to counter such colonial machinations, constructed an archetype of the loyal patriot-rebel, 'raceless' despite whatever hue their skin happened to be colored. Yet notwithstanding her attention to such political uses, Ferrer is careful not to posit race, even in its most discursive or ideological forms, in merely instrumental terms:

to argue that new patriotic writings served to nullify colonialist arguments should not, however, suggest that these patriotic claims were 'merely polemical responses' to colonial arguments. Nor should it suggest that nationalist writers did not value the principles of racial equality or that they invoked those principles cynically or instrumentally. (p. 137)

For Ferrer, such images and arguments were organically 'counter-hegemonic', rooted in the experience of a multi-racial movement engaged in anti-colonial struggle. Yet at the same time, deep patterns and attitudes of racism persisted, even among those who fought side by side. Colonial race baiting worked on many white rebels, leading them to surrender 'in large numbers' and repudiate the 'extent and character of black involvement' in the independence movement. Those whites who remained used the new raceless patriotism to silence complaints of racism made by people of color and tried to limit black participation to military rather than political positions of leadership.

Despite the often wide divergence between principles and practices, Ferrer never loses sight of the radical achievements – most notably the destruction of the institution of slavery – and potential of the emerging national consciousness. While hierarchies based on class and skin color were reproduced within the rebel army, *Insurgent Cuba* is at its ethnographic best in examining the moments – encounters between officers and soldiers, battles, trials – in which people of color used anti-racist patriotism to make a more inclusive nationalism a practical reality.

An attempt to make sense of the Atlantic Coast Miskitu opposition to the Sandinista revolution, Charles Hale's *Resistance and Contradiction* is a less felicitous account of the relationship of race, or in this case, ethnicity, to revolution. While primarily an ethnography of Miskitu–Sandinista relations during the transition to a negotiated regional autonomy following a period of armed conflict, Hale's study combines participant observation and field surveys with an historical account of the century-long history of antagonism between the Nicaraguan state and Miskitu communities.

A century's distance allows Ada Ferrer to examine the contradictions embedded in insurgent consciousness with some equanimity – appreciating its liberating aspects while

acknowledging and incorporating into her analysis its more noxious elements. Hale, however, literally conducted his fieldwork in a war zone. He alternated his time between Miskitu communities, where he valued their militancy and history while objecting to their uncritical celebration of all things North American, and the administrative town of Bluefields. At Bluefields he shared with his Sandinista friends and colleagues a revolutionary ethos but at the same time recoiled from their condescension and 'depreciation of Miskitu culture'. As does Ortner, Hale insists on taking seriously the interplay between political culture and structure, refusing to posit the former as either reified or autonomous or the latter as deterministic or reducible to class or material interests. He offers his work as a way to appreciate *both* the organic and legitimate nature of the Miskitu opposition while still understanding the role it played in advancing the interests of United States power *and* the liberating essence of the Sandinista revolution while still acknowledging its, at times, oppressive actions and attitudes toward indigenous peoples. To do so he draws from Gramsci and the Birmingham School of cultural studies, particularly the early work of Stuart Hall, Paul Gilroy, and Paul Willis. He adapts the term 'contradictory consciousness' to explore how Hispanic nationalism and US neocolonial suasion created two distinct 'cultures of resistance that limited their liberating potential and brought them squarely into conflict' (p. 16–17).

Although the Atlantic coast region was incorporated into Nicaragua in 1894 following nearly three centuries of direct and indirect British rule, the United States, through transnational companies and the Moravian Church, increasingly exerted influence over the region starting in the early 20th century. Many Nicaraguan politicians and nationalists found in the affinity Miskitu communities had with Anglo institutions a 'ready explanation' for the inability of the state to establish dominion over the Atlantic coast. Miskitu 'anti-Nicaraguan sentiments' were blamed *on* and *for* US cultural imperialism, writes Hale, just as 'imperialism in general blocked the state's legitimate aspirations for sovereignty'. With their 1979 victory, the Sandinistas interpreted this 'nationalist hyperbole' through the prism of a class-based revolutionary nationalism. As their efforts to bring the revolution to the region met with increased resistance, the Sandinista leadership came to identify Miskitu culture as the problem. They carried out a counter-insurgency program, which while not as murderous as those carried out by other US-supported governments on the isthmus nonetheless undercut the claims to popular legitimacy and liberation espoused by the revolution. While Hale 'affirms' the emancipating potential of Sandinista nationalism, he at the same time highlights the prejudices that 'led the Sandinistas to neglect, actively preclude, or seriously minimize the particular demands of the Miskitu Indians'. While the Sandinista state 'emphatically' called 'for the elimination of structural inequities', it nonetheless 'paid least attention to the particular form that worried Miskitu people the most: unequal relations between cultural minorities and Spanish-speakers, between their region and the nation-state. These contradictions help to explain why the revolution could not be expected to achieve and maintain Miskitu people's support' (p. 114).

On the other side of the equation, Hale charts out the historic roots of Miskitu 'Anglo affinity'. Starting in the 19th century, Miskitu authorities saw British authority as a buffer to 'oppressive Nicaraguan government rule'. Yet drawing on theories of hegemony, Hale is careful to neither render Miskitu actions or political culture in purely instrumental terms nor understand it in terms of false or imposed consciousness:

[Anglo affinity] developed out of their efforts to secure subsistence, resist oppression, and assert or defend a separate identity while living under multiple spheres of inequity. By drawing nearer to the institutions and practices of the North American-dominated civil society, they strengthened their distinct identity and acquired tangible political resources to advance their struggle. Thus from early in the century, the premises of both ethnic militancy and Anglo affinity became more deeply embedded in Miskitu people's consciousness, mutually reinforcing each other (p. 58).

Yet while ethnic militancy and Anglo affinity were reinforcing, they were likewise contradictory in the sense that despite their history of combative action most 'Miskitu have not critically examined the North American role in the system that (by their own account) oppressed them' (p. 58).

Notwithstanding their different focuses, styles, time periods, and subject matters, both *Resistance and Contradiction* and *Insurgent Cuba* are substantially similar. Although only Hale uses the term, both he and Ferrer focus on the 'contradictory consciousness' of popular groups, highlighting the tension between elements embedded in that consciousness that they define as either hegemonic or counter-hegemonic. Both the historian and the anthropologist are careful not to understand that consciousness, or political culture, as either self-consciously instrumental or structurally-determined. Nor do either suggest that the more hegemonic or deleterious aspects – in the case of Cuba, persistent racism, in Nicaragua, a Hispanic, class-based condescension on the part of the Sandinistas and an uncritical Anglo affinity on the part of the Miskitu – were simply imposed from above. Rather, both Ferrer and Hale relate the various expressions of the political consciousness they are studying to the lived experiences of individual actors and communities. In both cases, militant opposition, either to Spanish colonialism, US imperialism, or Nicaraguan state formation, produced political identities and cultures rooted in, in the words of John and Jean Comaroff, 'the endogenous historicity of local worlds (Comaroff and Comaroff 1992: 27)'.

Despite their finely nuanced renditions of political consciousness, both authors retain the right to judge those aspects of consciousness they deem potentially or actually liberating, harmful, or exclusionary. Hale in particular spends much time elaborating the theoretical premises that allows for such epistemological privilege, trying to create an analytical framework that can interpret 'multiple axes of oppression, which create blurred, shifting, contextual boundaries between dominant and subordinate' without completely neutering concepts such as resistance and power. In order to do so, Hale uses the 'weight of history', as understood by Renato Rosaldo, as both a measure of structural inequity and a ballast to ethereal postmodern skepticism. In examining the mutually constitutive relationship between Miskitu ethnic militancy and Anglo affinity, Hale argues that the former would not have withstood various assaults by a centralizing state were it not for the protection afforded by the latter. Thus Miskitu ethnic identity was never circumscribed or autonomous but was always composed in relation to the exogenous historicity of larger geo-political and economic realms of power. That Hale ranks those realms in a meaningful order of importance in the reproduction of extreme global inequality allows him to be sympathetic to Miskitu ethnic militancy but still critical of an Anglo affinity that aided the US in destroying a revolution that sought to challenge that inequality.

Although the political histories described by Ferrer and Hale differ in a number of respects, both share remarkably similar denouements. In both cases, US imperial designs used local political culture to its own ends. In April 1898, the United States invaded Cuba, establishing itself as the broker of Cuban independence just at the point the rebel army was about to defeat Spanish troops. In 1979, the CIA began to enlist influential Miskitu activists, who soon aligned their fight for self-determination with the US-sponsored Contra War. In both cases, US policy connected with the local interests and attitudes that comprised the less salutary half of Hale's 'contradictory consciousness' and Ferrer's 'inner war between racism and anti-racism'. In the case of Cuba, even before the US invaded, the 'nature and terrain of the conflict over racial inclusion shifted'. Who was a Cuban was no longer questioned – 30 years of insurgent war prohibited making a 'person's race grounds for inclusion or exclusion in the community of leaders'. Yet as the focus shifted from how to defeat the Spaniards to who should lead the new nation, 'merit and worthiness came to be associated less with military achievement than with other less tangible qualities: refinement, education, comportment, civilization'. These new standards mitigated 'the rebel army's leveling effects' and served to reintroduce racial hierarchy in an abhorring society that had literally banished the word race from its national vocabulary. Well before the United States arrived on the scene, a transfer of authority had taken place, with newly promoted white, refined officers displacing the black and mulatto leadership who had driven the Spanish to the brink of defeat. The invasion of segregated, highly race-conscious US troops accelerated this tendency. The most important national leaders chose to highlight their affinity with US officers and elites in the hope of convincing them that Cubans were civilized and capable of self-rule. In Nicaragua, as discussed earlier, Hale likewise demonstrates how Miskitu and US interests corresponded. To paraphrase the old activist slogan, if imperialism is to work globally it has to think locally.

Yet the strength of the approaches of both Ferrer and Hale is their refusal to let this complicity exhaust their analysis. For Ferrer, not only did the insurgent movement bring about significant advances – such as an abolition of slavery, civil rights, and universal male suffrage – that not even the US could roll back, it created a powerful promise of inclusion which continued to haunt Cuba's domestic and foreign policies throughout the course of the 20th century (see Piero Gleijeses' *Conflicting Missions: Havana, Washington, and Africa, 1959–1976* for an account of how Cuba's anti-racism informed its Cold War foreign policy, even when it contradicted its national self-interest). That Cuba's supposedly colorblind nationalism has been used to silence racial grievances, that Cuba's 1959 revolution failed to completely fulfill the promise of inclusion, or that inequalities along racial lines grew more acute after the fall of the USSR does not mitigate the fact that Cuba's 30-year insurgent war created a compelling racial counter-hegemony that marginalized groups continue to use to contest the terms of their marginalization (see Alejandro de la Fuente's important *A Nation for All: Race, Nationality, and Politics in Twentieth-Century Cuba*).

For Hale, the less fortunate aspects of Sandinista and Miskitu 'contradictory consciousness' created a confrontational situation that ultimately contributed to the defeat of the revolution and the installation of a neo-liberal regime 'intent on turning the clock back to pre-Sandinista times, when political and economic elites viewed the Coast as little more than a reserve for exploitable natural resources'. Yet the revolution's

demise also created, hopes Hale, the 'unprecedented potential' for the more exalted elements of the two political cultures to ally – namely Miskitu ethnic militancy and Sandinista structural analysis (freed from its Mestizo bias). Such an alliance would optimistically be part of a larger continent-wide rapprochement between national, class-based traditional Left organizations and new social movements advocating cultural and ethnic rights. Hale is no Pangloss; he knows that 'economic destitution, combined with the neoliberal onslaught' has largely destroyed the conditions that allowed for the revolutionary movements that marked Latin America's postwar period. Since the publication of *Resistance and Contradiction* in 1994, Miskitu–Sandinista relations, despite occasional overtures, have remained strained. Nevertheless, Miskitu militancy continues, including armed confrontations against state authorities, and will no doubt lead to new, 'unintended consequences'.

Skillfully avoiding the pitfalls identified by Ortner in many studies of subaltern resistance, Ferrer and Hale provide politically, culturally, and subjectively complex descriptions of popular opposition movements. In situating their work within larger historical and geo-political and economic frames – much along the lines of the Comaroffs' appeal for an 'anthropology of national [and] international forces and formations' – they do so in a way that does not adulterate the concept of resistance beyond recognition or usefulness.³ Indeed, both authors, *not despite* but *because* of their embrace of *both* ethnographic complexity *and* historical depth, are able to move beyond a scholarly infatuation with subaltern agency to appreciate the centrality of resistance in social transformation.

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GREG GRANDIN teaches Latin American history at New York University and is the author of *The Blood of Guatemala: A History of Race and Nation* (Duke, 2000). Address: New York University, Department of History, 53 Washington Square South, New York, NY 10012, USA. [email: grandin@nyu.edu]
