

To Frank

Edwin Melendez, February 21, 2011

We all come across people who influence us through their ideas and actions. Some of us are fortunate to come across mentors, and perhaps a few exceptional individuals who make a profound difference in our lives. Leaving aside our parents, who have a greater motivation to see us succeed in life, some mentors teach us about life and relations, others about ideas and approaches. Frank Bonilla was one of those exceptional individuals who was a mentor to me and to many others. His sphere of influence grew as his professional life evolved.

As a Latin American scholar, Frank was an insightful critic of the political elites that generate inequality and oppression. He collaborated with leading intellectuals of the period in shaping a foundation for a new understanding of the relationship between countries with advanced economies and the so-called less developed countries. In particular, Frank was interested in the role of social movements in Latin America and the construction of new paths for younger generations. By the late 1960s, after a very successful and distinguished academic career, Frank became involved with the Puerto Rican student movement. This was a convergence of interest and passion: the birth of the field of Puerto Rican Studies promoted by the very forces – students' revolts leading to a process of profound social change –to which he had devoted by then two decades of intellectual and professional work in Latin America.

Borrowing a concept from Gramsci, Arcadio Diaz-Quinonez refers to Frank as an organic intellectual. This concept is often used to describe leaders whose class background explains an affinity towards and participation in advancing the aspirations of social groups. Other examples would include the *tabaquero* Bernardo Vega or the labor leader and activists Luisa Capetillo. I share the view of Frank as an organic intellectual not only because of his humble beginnings and class roots; more than anything, he was a catalyst for the ideas that served as a foundation for the field of Puerto Rican Studies.

Frank was able to develop, along with other collaborators, a comprehensive view of the origins and evolution of the stateside Puerto Rican community and the dynamic, and often contentious, relationship with the island and its politics and its economic and social development. Granted, these ideas were far from being universally accepted, but they certainly were interconnected to, and reflected, an inherent perspective of the students demanding open admissions at CUNY and the creation of Departments of Puerto Rican Studies. Moreover, these ideas certainly established the point of departure for research and academic inquiry in the field.

Like many others, I knew of Frank's ideas and stature in academia years before I first met him. As a doctoral student I was interested in understanding the economic relationship between Puerto Rico and the United States, a topic about which Frank, along with other colleagues, had developed valuable insights. Frank served on my brother's dissertation committee, and Edgardo knew the literature and Frank's contributions to it well. We often and passionately debated the limiting nature of the colonial state and the structural constraints imposed by a dependent economy on the economic crisis of the island in the 1970s and '80s.

As I recall, it was Professor Clara Rodriguez, a dear mentor and friend, who introduced me to Frank for the first time. Clara too was an established scholar and chaired the hiring committee at Fordham University when I was hired there in 1984. She had worked at Centro and knew Frank well. Shortly after I moved to New York City Clara invited me to attend an informal seminar called The Puerto Rican Research Exchange.

The Exchange was run by Eddie Gonzalez in the New York facilities of Cornell's labor studies program. Eddie would select a topic and invite one or two speakers to share their work with the rest of us. And just to make sure we had incentives to attend, he ordered a five- or six-foot-long sandwich from a local deli to feed us. Frank and the Centro staff attended meetings frequently and helped Eddie with the seminars' marketing and logistics. The Exchange left a life-lasting impression on me. Though many attended the seminars on occasions, depending on the topic's relevance to them, I do not think I missed one event in the years I lived in New York City at the time. Afterwards, I often attended when I could take the time to drive from Boston to the city. I was meeting fascinating colleagues, all with an interest in the field that I was beginning to know and understand. In addition to Frank and Clara, I met Gabriel Haslip-Viera, Virginia Sanchez-Korrol, James Jennings, Angelo Falcon, Lloyd Rodgler, Pedro Caban, Olga Jimenez de Wagenheim Jose Hernandez-Alvarez, and too many others to mention. We even had a presentation by Juan Flores, which included an intertwined poetry reading from Tato Laviera. The Exchange preceded the creation of the 1987 founding of the CENTRO Journal and the Puerto Rican Studies Association in 1992. I consider the Exchange to be my initiation into the field, and appreciate the relationships that we built and the neutrality of the forum, which encouraged the discussion of ideas.

As the Exchange was strengthening the connections among Puerto Rican scholars, Frank also was involved with the ambitious project of bringing together a national coalition of academics to create a consortium of university-based research centers devoted to the study of the growing Latino population in the United States. Frank was one of four center directors that created the Inter-University Program for Latino Research (IUPLR). Though they had met and negotiated support from the Ford Foundation for the creation of a national organization, it was in 1984 that for the first time a large group of scholars met at Stanford to discuss the formulation for a broad intellectual agenda. The Stanford conference was quickly followed by the creation of working groups (conceptually similar to the task forces created by Centro's leadership team in 1974) and the sponsoring of research competitions. IUPLR sponsored its first research competition in 1985. Though the focus on Puerto Ricans and other Latinos in the United States labor markets was not one in which I had done prior work, Frank encouraged me to submit a proposal. I did, received the award, and was invited to participate in a national conference devoted to the discussion of the commissioned research. The 1985 IUPLR research conference was the first of many other IUPLR and working group meetings in which I have participated over the last decades. Like the Exchange, IUPLR, its conferences, and working groups provided – and still provide -- an invaluable support network to me and many other Latino scholars.

Shortly after I joined the MIT faculty, along with my former Fordham colleagues Clara Rodriguez and Janis Barry, we organized a series of three one-day seminars focusing on Latinos in the Northeast labor markets. Many of the presenters at the seminar were awardees of the IUPLR competitions. In addition to us at MIT (Clara was a visiting scholar at MIT that year and co-taught a course with me), Frank and

Centro sponsored one of the seminars and Palmira Rios of the New School sponsored the third one. Here I confronted university politics Puerto Rican style for the first time. As part of the three-pronged seminar, we circulated a letter to various professors inviting them to be presenters or discussants for one of the conference panels. In response, a small group of academics signed a letter requesting Centro to withdraw its support for the seminar because they objected the financial support from some of the sponsors of the event, among other reasons.

From that point on things went downhill and included a protest by a very small group of one of the seminars in New York and personal attacks on both Frank and me. I felt terrible and apologized to Frank for putting him in that kind of situation. I then saw a side of Frank, an assertiveness and resolve that made a lasting impression on me. He explained that a feud had been going on for a while with Centro, that the protesters represented only a couple of disgruntled individuals. He assured me that I should not worry and showed a calm yet zealous response which I was not expecting. He explained that he had already spoken to the university leadership and considered that this was a small hiccup in an otherwise important project. The important thing was to persevere, he said, and that if we believed in the mission of our project, we needed to move forward on our terms, not theirs. We conducted the seminars successfully. As Frank anticipated there were no interruptions, and the project eventually resulted in the publication of an important volume on Latinos in labor markets.

In 1988, I asked Frank to serve as mentor and Centro as the sponsor of my post-doctoral fellowship. The fellowship allowed me to work on the analysis of migration data from the Puerto Rican Planning Board, a source rarely used for the study of migration. This study was also sponsored by the Office of the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico. That was a very hectic year for Frank. At the time, the Hon. Nydia Velazquez was the director of the office, and Frank and she were in discussions about transferring their archives to Centro. This was the first time that I worked intensely with Frank on a project. (It was my project nevertheless.) I had the opportunity to talk extensively with him about his vision for Centro and the significance of the Commonwealth's collection to the archives. Frank was a visionary. Despite his well-known left-leaning politics and his assiduous criticism of the economic development model spearheaded by the Popular Democratic Party, he understood the importance of finding common ground with the government of Puerto Rico when possible. Preserving the heritage of the Puerto Rican community in the United States, even if through the lenses of the implementers of a migration policy that displaced millions of Puerto Ricans from their birthplace, was in this case a shared interest.

In 1988 IUPLR headquarters moved from Stanford to Hunter and Frank became its managing co-director. For Frank, IUPLR was about coalition building among Latinos. He despised academic competition for foundation resources and strongly believed that unity among the largest Latino research centers would bring far more benefits to all involved. Under his leadership IUPLR working groups gained momentum. Frank was personally involved in a few of them (one devoted to higher education, one concerned with Cuban-U.S. relations, another to political economy, etc.). As a result of this networking and Frank's leadership, IUPLR expanded from the original four centers to eight, and with the inclusion of the Cuban Research Institute at FIU for the first time grew to include other than Puerto Rican (Centro) and Mexican American centers. Years later, Frank was also instrumental in the creation of the CUNY Dominican Studies Institute. Frank's vision of collaboration is well entrenched in the continued success of IUPLR,

the successful coalition of scholars he helped create and to which he devoted the last decade of his professional career

In 1992, I became director of the Mauricio Gaston Institute. Accepting this position was a difficult decision for me and I sought Frank's advice. We were working on one of our projects and he invited me to his vacation home on Long Island. We had the opportunity to talk well into the night about the challenges of management and of heading a research center entrenched in a community and, yes, to drink some bourbon (which I only did when I was with him). I assume that he was persuasive, though in all frankness I cannot remember too much about the conversation. Shortly after I became director, IUPLR asked the Gaston Institute to join as a member center. IUPLR continued to grow over the years and today, under the leadership of Gil Cardenas, more than twenty centers belong to the organization.

One of the most inspirational activities of any IUPLR working groups was a week-long symposium on the Rockefeller Foundation's Bellagio retreat complex. Frank, along with a group of about twenty scholars, worked on a project intended to build intellectual bridges among Latino and Latin American scholars. Despite the beautiful views and majestic accommodations, the IUPLR working group participants were able to exchange ideas about the theme "Changing the Americas from within the United States." In addition to the academic products and camaraderie resulting from the conference, many of us continued working in IUPLR groups and activities over the years. Most recently, Centro staff is participating in a newly created working group on the Hispanic Caribbean as a field of study led by Ramona Hernandez and the CUNY Dominican Institute. Frank's vision of collaboration is well entrenched in the continued success of IUPLR, the successful coalition of scholars he helped create and to which he devoted the last decade of his professional career.

A few years ago, long after Frank retired, I became the director of Centro. I knew very well the role of the organization in the field and its flagship status at Hunter College and CUNY. I also knew that Frank's stewardship is broadly credited for anchoring and developing the organization. What I did not know that well was the early history of Centro and the specific role that Frank played in its creation. As I learn more about his role in the creation of Centro my admiration for Frank has grown exponentially. In all the years I knew him, he never spoke about his protagonist role in the process. And when I tried to extract anecdotes about the challenges of the period, for him it was always about the collective, never the individual. He never accepted praises for his collaborative work, instead he would say that it were his collaborators, not him who deserved the credit.

As I find more information about the creation of Centro and those tumultuous first few years of existence, overwhelming evidence points to Frank as the only leader capable of reconciling the disparate forces propelling the creation of Centro. Similar efforts at Lehmann College and Columbia University failed for lack of support from some of the sectors that eventually propelled the creation of Centro. The three major bases of support had differing goals for Centro: CUNY administrators were concerned with academic standards, the Ford Foundation had high expectations for the success of the programs in which they invested, and the student and faculty that spearheaded creation of Centro were motivated by social justice ideals. Now is the time to revisit this history; too bad Frank diverted attention away from his own role and did not fully share the intricacies of such a critical period with us.

Frank knew how influential he was in the lives of others. He certainly knew how influential he was to me. After reading these lines the reader may wonder whether I am just a devoted disciple blinded by the charisma of an extraordinary yet self-effacing man. In truth, Frank and I never collaborated in substantive papers because we did not have the same approach to common research interests. And on some topics we did have clear disagreements. These matters might be the topic of another essay. What I most dearly remember about my interactions with Frank is the excitement that I felt when we debated his writings and ideas, and when we debated my writings and ideas. A soft spoken and unpretentious man, Frank depended on persuasion and a profound respect for the ideas of others to influence them.

I was fortunate to meet Frank at an early stage in my professional career, fresh out of graduate school. Frank introduced me to the support networks that have shaped my relations among those in Puerto Rican and Latino studies for decades. As a friend, he helped me navigate through a difficult career, as well as through political and personal situations. But as much as I cherished his advice and support, I consider that his most lasting legacy to me is how I think about and how I view the world. His legacy lives in me as it lives in the memories of so many others.