The Radical Latino Island in the Deep South

Jose Yglesias

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarcommons.usf.edu/tampabayhistory

Recommended Citation
Yglesias, Jose (1985) "The Radical Latino Island in the Deep South," *Tampa Bay History: Vol. 7 : Iss. 2, Article 14.*
Available at: https://scholarcommons.usf.edu/tampabayhistory/vol7/iss2/14

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Open Access Journals at Scholar Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Tampa Bay History by an authorized editor of Scholar Commons. For more information, please contact scholarcommons@usf.edu.
THE RADICAL LATINO ISLAND IN THE DEEP SOUTH*

by Jose Yglesias

Ybor City is not a place where time has stood still, but a town ravaged by time and lost social struggles. This doesn’t mean there is nothing to celebrate about the special contributions this Latino community has made to Floridian and Cuban history—indeed, there are many more than the article suggests—but if it was inevitable that its special ambiente die out, the truth about it must not.

Let me say it right out—Ybor City was a radical, trade-union town. Sr. Martínez Ybor began a cigarmaking industry there in the 1880’s to get away from the labor problems that plagued him in Havana. He found an equally humid climate in Tampa (necessary then to cigarmaking), but he

* This essay originally appeared in August, 1977, as “a letter in response to a galling view of Ybor City” published by the magazine Nuestro.
made the mistake of hiring the same skilled workers from Cuba. The short trip across the Gulf of Mexico did not serve as ideological fumigation: even before his factory officially opened, his workers went on strike. For this reason, a New York colleague whom Martínez Ybor had persuaded to build a factory there got the credit for first producing habanos and not the man for whom that ward of Tampa was named.

The workers who settled the swampy area that Tampa officials turned over to the cigar manufacturers were not only Cuban. They were also Spanish and Sicilian. A typical Ybor City Tampan of my generation (I am 57) has, like me, a mother of Cuban parentage and a father from Galicia, uncles from Asturias and Cuba, and at least one cousin or sister or brother married to a Sicilian. In Ybor City there is a Círculo Cubano and a Centro Español and a Centro Asturiano and Sociedad Italiana. They were wonderfully active cultural centers, for those cigarmakers knew how to organize more than trade unions, and two of them also built hospitals for their members, the best in Tampa at the time. All of them maintained a staff of doctors who served the
members at no cost other than the monthly dues, and the American Medical Association bitterly fought these practices. The societies had to import most of their doctors, but there was one americano who fought the AMA ban, a marvelous surgeon named Dr. Winton whose first name, que Dios me perdone, I can’t remember now.

These social clubs all had libraries, auditoriums, gyms, dance halls, and canteens where the men gathered in the evening. At the Centro Asturiano we saw zarzuelas performed by local amateurs. When great international performers, like Caruso, came to Tampa, it was the cigarmakers who booked them, not the americanos on the other side of Nebraska Avenue. Saturday nights young people (properly chaperoned) went from one dance to another at the four social clubs. I remember as a boy going to a free art class summer evenings at the Circulo Cubano. All the clubs were organized and run by the cigarmakers. All their officers and committees were democratically elected, and no one was paid for his troubles.

(There was a fifth club—the Martí-Maceo—and its formation is, perhaps, the worst example of the compromises Ybor City felt were necessary with the mores and laws of Florida. The members of this club were, in the main, black Cubans whom Jim Crow kept out of the others. They worked side by side with whites in the cigar factories and they were sometimes surreptitiously accepted as members of the Círculo Cubano, but they could not attend social functions at any or be hospitalized at the Español and Asturiano.)

What gave those Latins that kind of conciencia? Most will tell you that it was the result of an innovation that Ybor City cigarmakers can claim as their own—the readers in the factories. They thought of it, not the factory owners. Each worker paid about 25¢ a week to hire an experienced lector to read to them during four hours of the working day. Two hours of newspapers and periodicals, two hours of a novel or non-fiction. The workers voted not only for the reader to be hired but also for the book to be read. Many of them may well have been functional illiterates, but they were well read in the great literature of the Spanish language and in authors like Dickens, Tolstoy, Zola, and Balzac.

They kept alive the Cuban revolutionary tradition (José Martí gave some of his most important political speeches there) and also the Spanish and Italian anarchist ones. Anarchist newspapers were read by the lectores until the United States entered the First World War. After the Bolshevik revolution, Communist papers were read, too, including the New York Daily Worker, which the lector translated at sight. Today there would be grants from many a foundation to help a community with so original and effective a program for adult education; but in Ybor City the readers irked the factory owners and, during the Depression, they summarily did away with them. The cigarmakers went on strike. Ever heard of workers anywhere striking for culture?

Of course, Ybor City workers were used to going on strike. With their own contributions they had built a Labor Temple where they could organize without endangering their social clubs. The American trade-union movement (the AFL) would not support them, but the Havana cigarmakers sent over contributions, just as the Ybor City ones collected money for their Havana brothers when they went on strike. They marked the passage of time in Ybor City by some of the biggest walkouts: the twelve-month strike of 1910, the ten-month strike of 1920. But although they held out and fought hard, they never won a strike. It could not be otherwise—they were a
The Depression hit a luxury industry like Ybor City’s hard, and the new generations were being weaned away. With the second World War the industry rallied, and it did well, too, in the postwar years. Although the readers were no longer in the factories, there was still political struggle; during the Spanish Civil War the town was almost, one might say, on a war footing to help the Republic. In the postwar period, the factory owners did finally negotiate with their CIO representatives, but in the days of Joe McCarthy the radical leaders were blacklisted—nothing new for Ybor City: there had always been blacklists after a strike.

The final blow came with the revolution in Cuba. You could not make first-rate cigars without tobacco from the Vuelta Abajo area of Pinar del Rio. That’s that. And our embargo cut it off. Most Latins in Ybor City were fidelistas, and they did not hold it against “el caballo” that the end had come. For the old-timers the embargo was further proof of the barbarity of
americanos—the “crackers” with hair on their teeth who once broke up their union meetings and called them “Cuban niggers.” The new Cuban exiles were for them new indeed—they were counterrevolutionary. And that (although no stranger will hear this from them) makes them untrustworthy. They remember reactionaries who denounced them to the FBI and with impunity, like that of the old nightriders, flung buckets of red paint at their homes.

I thought your readers should know some of the history and thoughts of those women and men in the photographs in the photo-essay. Those old men playing dominoes well know what Ybor City was like. The reason the sign in the window of a bar, so well caught by the photographer, says it closes at 10 p.m. is that in the last 15 years many have been mugged on the way home and no one now lingers on dear old Seventh Avenue when the sun goes down. If the photographer had moved his camera one block away, we could have seen, in some cases, the empty fields high with weeds where once stood the clapboard houses in which they lived, bulldozed now, awaiting new real-estate entrepreneurs. The moral: we Latins are not necessarily of a piece.