

# *Blanco-Fombona and Hispanic Cultural Unity*

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Blanco-Fombona, the Venezuelan polygraph, was one of the most outspoken and passionate defenders of the Hispanic cause among that illustrious generation of Latin Americans called the *noventistas*. Some of the modernist poets, who were his contemporaries, are perhaps better known, but no voice was more sincere nor more influential than his in the *hispanidad* movement which reached its zenith during the years 1895-1915. The white heat of his passions for those things he loved and those things he hated sets him apart from all the Latin American intellectuals of his time. He loved Bolívar the Liberator and forever praised his idealistic dream of a unified Latin America. He hated caudillos and dictators, especially one Venezuelan dictator—Juan Vicente Gómez, whom he called “Juan Bizonte” in his unceasing attacks against him. He loved *la raza española*, especially the conquistadores and the great family of nations which they brought into being, and he hated “yankees and yankee imperialism” perhaps more than any Latin American. With the possible exception of his kindly attitude toward Spain, his aspirations and objections are the same as those expressed by thousands of students and intellectuals in Latin America today. In this respect he is very modern.

As to the role of these intellectuals and their attitude towards the United States, Frank Tannenbaum recently observed that

... vis-a-vis the United States there is a community of public opinion, south of the border which is well nigh a unanimity, and to no small degree this is the work of the intellectuals. They have moulded the Latin American Community and have indirectly had a great influence on the political attitudes of their community toward the United States. These intellectuals

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are really caught in a world where their major role is that of critic.<sup>1</sup>

This notion certainly applies to Blanco-Fombona. He wrote novels, poetry, short stories, all types of essays, and editorials, but his chief role is that of a critic who at least expresses, if not molds, public opinion. He is a *pensador* whose great ideal was to unite the Hispanic peoples in order to withstand the onslaught of "yankee imperialism."

Why was he so uncompromising in his attitude toward the United States? What was the exact nature of the unity which he envisioned for his compatriots? How did he really feel about Hispanic American Unity? The analysis of these attitudes, sentiments, and passions in the work of Blanco-Fombona leads generally into the field of literature and specifically into that phase of it known as *pensamiento*, an extremely effective tool for the study of what H. K. Silvert has recently called the "emotional commonwealth"<sup>2</sup> of Latin America.

Blanco-Fombona needed little encouragement to hate the yankees. He spent several years as a student in the United States, and on one occasion became involved in a street brawl which cost him dearly. A rather inebriated New Yorker had made insulting remarks about his Spanish accent and the fight was on. A New York newspaper says:

Mr. Fombona struck out right and left, assaulted four people with his cane, and broke the arm of policeman Fowler. He was taken to court, and fined, and paid the sum of \$2,000.<sup>3</sup>

Were he not a man of great moral principles, one might be led to believe that his hatred for the United States stemmed from the loss of such a large sum of money. However, he had much deeper reasons.

Did Blanco-Fombona believe that the Hispanic race was superior in the Hegelian sense? Probably not. What he really wanted was to halt the progress which Anglo-Saxon culture was making in places like Puerto Rico, Texas, the Philippines, and

<sup>1</sup>Frank Tannenbaum, "Toward an Appreciation of Latin America," *The United States and Latin America*, ed. Herbert L. Mathews (New York: The American Assembly, 1959), p. 56.

<sup>2</sup>H. K. Silvert, "Political Change in Latin America," *The United States and Latin America*, ed. Herbert L. Mathews (New York: The American Assembly, 1959), p. 61.

<sup>3</sup>Andrés González Blanco, *Escritores representativos de América* (Madrid: Editorial América, 1917), p. 91.

Cuba. Many times he cited, as an example, Texas, where Spanish was no longer spoken, and referred to the Spanish spoken in Puerto Rico and the Philippines as being "wounded in the heart."<sup>4</sup>

The appearance of a book, *The Americanization of the World*, was occasion for Blanco-Fombona to break out in bitter protest. The author was Mr. Stead of England, who sought to strengthen the ties among the English-speaking peoples and point out the growing influence of American ideas, books, newspapers, religion, as well as political and economic power. Blanco-Fombona protested against the claim with respect to American culture, saying that American newspapers were distinctly inferior and that American literature was not even influential in the Hawaiian Islands. He was pleased to note that Mr. Stead considered the "least Americanized area" of the world to be South America, but then warned that the United States was already asking for strips of land on either side of the future canal in Panama.

They threaten us from every side and our greatest weakness is in the disunity which characterizes our race. I do not ask Americans to regress to the fetus stage and to breathe through the umbilical cord which Simon Bolivar cut many years ago, but isn't it possible to bring together the peoples of the Spanish race from both worlds?<sup>5</sup>

Although he placed emphasis on the need for unity in order to combat the Anglo-Saxon race, he certainly did not think that the Hispanic race was inferior. He insisted that "as for the United States we are not inferior to them in anything except mechanical inventions and we have the advantage over them as far as artistic sentiment is concerned."

He pointed out also that it was not just one party or group in the United States that constituted the danger. "All these people have only one national characteristic. The enemy of America is the United States."<sup>6</sup>

He did not hesitate, however, to make a personal attack on

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<sup>4</sup>Rufino Blanco-Fombona, "A propósito del premio Nobel otorgado a España en la persona de Benavente," *Motivos y letras de España* (Madrid: Renacimiento, 1930), p. 79.

<sup>5</sup>Rufino Blanco-Fombona, "La americanización del mundo," *Letras y letras de América* (París: Sociedad de Ediciones Literarias y Artísticas, 1908), p. 170.

<sup>6</sup>Rufino Blanco-Fombona. "Norteamérica de origen inglés contra Latino

McKinley, President of the United States during the Spanish-American War, which brought embarrassment to the Hispanic peoples.

Odio a McKinley porque es un conquistador sin correr peligros, un asesino de levita; porque ha abierto la ambición del imperialismo yanqui, porque sus manos de verdugo señalan a la codicia del norte nuestra gran patria de Hispanoamérica. Le abomino porque hummilló a nuestra raza, hummillando a España. Le odio porque es odioso.<sup>7</sup>

During his younger days as a politician and administrator in the provinces of Venezuela, Blanco-Fombona distinguished himself as a fiery defender of liberty and equality. His defiance of the Gómez regime earned him frequent imprisonment, and eventually led to official and permanent banishment from Venezuela. He turned to literature early, pouring out his invective for the dictators and caudillos but also writing some of his finest poetry before leaving Venezuela.

As a political exile, he chose to spend the greater part of his life in Spain. Upon arriving there in 1912, he at once established a publishing firm (Editorial América) in which he published over the years hundreds of volumes by Latin American authors.<sup>8</sup>

He waged an incessant campaign in newspapers, journals, essays and private conversations for a reconciliation between Spain and Latin America. His principal contribution in this respect was in making Latin American literature available to the Spaniards and in defending Spain against her detractors in the New World.

Blanco-Fombona had little patience with those who sought to organize Hispanic unity on the basis of official delegates to an international congress. What he advocated most enthusiastically was a permanent cultural commission for the diffusion of Spanish culture. He claimed that Spain had never spent enough money to promote cultural institutes and adds a new idea to the Alberdi doctrine of *gobernar es poblar*. He would

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américa de origen español, *Obras selectas*, ed. by Gabaldón Márques (Madrid: Edime, 1958), p. 1140.

<sup>7</sup>Rufino Blanco-Fombona, *La lámpara de Aladino* (Madrid: Renacimiento, 1915), p. 402.

<sup>8</sup>Rufino Blanco-Fombona, "El libro español," *Motivos y letras de España* (Madrid: Renacimiento, 1930), p. 121.

change that dictum to read *gobernar es divulgar la lengua*. Spain had a cultural mission to accomplish in America. She should occupy a place similar to that which Rome had with respect to the Mediterranean world.<sup>9</sup> In order to accomplish this mission, Spain should undertake a serious cultural rejuvenation and publish more great books which would attract the attention of the Hispanic republics of the New World.

In spite of this type of criticism, he constantly defended Spain and worked for unity among the Hispanic nations. On one occasion some enthusiastic Chileans and Argentines had claimed that Spaniards were stagnant and scoffed at what they called *holgazanería española*. Blanco-Fombona the knight errant of truth then countered, that *holgazanería española* worked mines in Bilbao, cultivated vineyards in la Mancha and Aragón, raised cattle in Andalucía and engaged in all kinds of industries in Cataluña and Valencia.

At one moment in the history of the *holgazanería española* our grandfathers drove the moors out of the peninsula, discovered, conquered, and colonized America, carried the Spanish flag to Africa and Asia, and opening its arms in Europe with a heroic and magnificent gesture, placed one hand over Flanders and the other over Naples.<sup>10</sup>

To those Spanish critics like Julio Casares—who believed that America owes spiritual vassalage to Spain because it speaks her language—Blanco-Fombona replied that the language belongs to both peoples equally. Both Spain and Latin America have inherited it from their grandparents.<sup>11</sup> Latin American intellectuals are as concerned about keeping the language pure as the Spaniards.

Some Spaniards claimed that Latin America had no literature because it was merely an extension of Spanish literature. He pointed out that those who believed this idea are not acquainted with certain plants, for instance the banana plant, which produces in turn completely new plants, independent of the former ones. They give their own fruit, owing their growth

<sup>9</sup>Rufino Blanco-Fombona, "Persistirá el espíritu de España en el nuevo tipo de cultura que se está creando en América?" *Motivos y letras de España* (Madrid: Renacimiento, 1930), p. 69.

<sup>10</sup>Andrés González Blanco, *Escritores representativos de América* (Madrid: Editorial América, 1917), p. 111.

<sup>11</sup>Rufino Blanco-Fombona, "Persistirá el espíritu de España en el nuevo tipo de cultura que se está creando en América?" *op. cit.*, p. 69.

only to the land, the air, the rain, and their own fruitful nature.<sup>12</sup>

To those Spaniards who claimed that Latin Americans were barbarians, Blanco-Fombona countered that the only difference between the peninsular Spaniards and the Latin Americans was a matter of progress. "We are children of the French Revolution," he says.

We are the beginning of a new race which comes from Spanish roots placed in new soil. But those who have contributed most to the evolution of our language in the New World were persons not only saturated with foreign literatures; they also were intimately acquainted with the Spanish classics: José Martí, for example, Gutiérrez Nájera, José Asunción, Silva, Darío, and Casal.<sup>13</sup>

For Blanco-Fombona, the Modernist Movement in Latin America was the literary declaration of independence. When asked if he thought that political independence had brought as a natural consequence liberation from Spanish thought, he replied that when a people achieves political independence it is because their thinking is already independent. He maintained that two distinct literatures could exist in the same language and claimed that the literature was bringing new tones from the "old European instrument." In addition to the revolutionary spirit, he said,

traemos el culto de la forma, el amor de las cosas elegantes, una prosa dinámica y unos versos sin la vieja elocuencia campañuda, unos versos descoyuntados, gráciles, ágiles . . . y por último debe cargarse en nuestro deber la sensibilidad, es decir, una intensa emoción estética, lo mismo que la ternura y el sensualismo en el arte.<sup>14</sup>

This is what Unamuno meant when he declared that the Spanish language was saying things in America that it had never said in Spain.

Blanco-Fombona wanted unity on his own terms. He felt that if Spain and Latin America were going to be brought closer together there must be more recognition in Spain for the

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<sup>12</sup>Rufino Blanco-Fombona, "Le ciudadanía literaria de España" *Motivos y letras de España* (Madrid: Renacimiento, 1930), p. 27.

<sup>13</sup>Rufino Blanco-Fombona, "La cuestión del neo-español," *Letras y letrados de Hispanoamérica* (París: Sociedad de Ediciones Literarias y Artísticas, 1908), p. 131.

<sup>14</sup>Rufino Blanco-Fombona, "El aporte de América a la literatura," *Obras selectas*, ed. by Gabaldón Márquez (Madrid: Edime, 1958), p. 1086.

accomplishments of the Latin American Republics. His desire for unity with Spain was superseded only by his fanatic devotion to his own American culture.

Blanco-Fombona never spoke as a Venezuelan but rather as a citizen of that great emotional commonwealth which he called *la patria grande*. "Nunca he sido patriota lugareño . . ." he said.

The problem of race is above the problem of nationalities. Blood is the strongest tie between peoples and . . . as for me, a spiritual heir to the ideas of Bolívar who wanted and claimed the whole of America as his native land, I have always been a fervent americanist. Literarily I have never made the slightest distinction between my republic and the sister republics. I am a compatriot of all the ibero-americans. I should like never to be called a Venezuelan author, but rather an American author.<sup>15</sup>

He then concludes in his characteristic style:

. . . Yo no escribo para los cuatro gatos de mi país. Escribo para sesenta millones de Américo-latinos y veintitantes millones de Españoles. Mi patriotismo es un sentimiento de raza.<sup>16</sup>

Ricardo Rojas, himself a great hispanophile, once wrote that although the republics of the New World lived in relative geographic and economic isolation there exists among the men of letters a solidarity similar to that which existed among the compatriots of Independence days. He felt that their common language was the foundation for this cultural brotherhood, and because of this unity, Hispanic American thought was destined to have increasing power in the future. Upon reading these prophetic and fraternal words, Blanco-Fombona stated that he closed his eyes and with his thoughts gave "un abrazo y un apretón de manos a ese Ricardo Rojas que no conozco."<sup>17</sup> He didn't know Ricardo Rojas, and had not looked up his genealogy, but he accepted him immediately as a brother because he understood him so completely.

Blanco-Fombona naively stated that since the majority of the people are engaged in pastoral, mining, and agricultural pursuits, they do not have and do not need a great interchange of commercial products. However, he claimed that the republics of Latin America which are quite isolated commercially

<sup>15</sup>Rufino Blanco-Fombona, *Letras y letrados de Hispanoamérica* (París: Sociedad de Ediciones literarias y artísticas, 1908), p. 4.

<sup>16</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 5.

<sup>17</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 6.

speaking, are united and tied together by art and literature. "How can one deny," he said, "the Hispanic American Nationality with respect to Letters?"<sup>18</sup>

Blanco-Fombona did not hesitate to point out his preference for Spanish racial characteristics as a basis for the cultural unity which he sought. He claimed that the roots of the present culture in Latin America are exclusively Spanish, although on the branches there have been grafted other complimentary cultures.

In *El espíritu de Bolívar*, one of the many volumes he wrote on the same theme, Fombona saw Bolívar, the greatest of all Americans, as a person whose soul is essentially Spanish. He was proud and dignified, but above all *un pasional*, like so many Spaniards. The all-consuming passion of his life was, of course, his desire to liberate America from Spain, and even this anti-Spanish attitude is considered typically Spanish by Blanco-Fombona. Bolívar prided himself on being as idealistic as Don Quijote or even Christ himself. On one occasion he came upon a group of his soldiers who were complaining that they had nothing to read. When Bolívar found among their books copies of *Gil Blas* and *Don Quijote* he remarked that they didn't need anything else. "Here you have man as he is, and man as he ought to be."<sup>19</sup>

Blanco-Fombona continued to show that Bolívar had all the character traits possessed by El Cid and other authentic representatives of the Spanish soul. Speaking of his great personal pride, Blanco-Fombona recalled Bolívar's aide de camp, a young athletic soldier, who in order to show his skill and agility jumped over his horse *de cola a cabeza*. Not to be out-done Bolívar had to try it too. On the first try he did not clear the horse's head and fell to the ground in a heap. On the second try the same thing happened, but he persisted and on the third try he finally made it. For Fombona, this indicates essentially the same traits which the great conquistadores possessed.<sup>20</sup>

In his insistence on pure Hispanic culture Blanco-Fombona found himself at odds with some of the most outstanding thinkers of his own time. For González Prada and José Carlos Mari-

<sup>18</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup>Rufino Blanco-Fombona, *El espíritu de Bolívar* (Caracas: Impresores Unidos, 1943), p. 13.

<sup>20</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 15.

átegui of Peru and others, the Indians played a dominant role in Spanish American heritage while Blanco-Fombona tended to minimize or ignore them. He was much more interested in the contribution of the conquistadores and the valiant Spaniards,

In his beautiful poem "To Roosevelt," Rubén Darío recalls for the benefit of the "Yankee invaders" the glories of Latin America's poetic tradition. He extols the virtues of Netzahualcoyotl and Montezuma, but according to Fombona omits the great names of the Spanish race.

. . . No, beloved poet, when you wish to command respect from the enemies of America, of our America, you cannot leave out Bolívar, Sucre, San Martín, Miranda, Hidalgo, Santander, Carrera and Morazán. The Indians might be part of the poetic legendary tradition but not the legend and the poetry of the America which we call Spanish America, but rather of that land they used to call *Las Indias*. I prefer 100 times over, Hernán Cortez triumphant to Montezuma conquered, and I believe that Pizarro crossing the Andes with a hand full of adventurers is 100 times more worthy of epic and legend than Atahualpa falling from the throne in the midst of his decimated empire.<sup>21</sup>

In many ways his ideas are similar to those expressed later by José Vasconcelos in *La raza cósmica*. However, Vasconcelos claimed that the days of the pure white races were numbered, and the new fifth race of America would be superior because it was a combination of many peoples. Blanco-Fombona, speaking about the political problems of Venezuela, declared that there was no hope for Venezuela unless she decided as soon as possible to become a caucasian race. He did not want to destroy the Indians and Negroes because "they are our brothers," but he said, "hay que blanquearlos por constantes cruzamientos."<sup>22</sup>

It would appear that Blanco-Fombona did not represent the majority when he spoke of the Catholic Church and the common religion of his people, although some of the modernists of his day had the same attitude. He was avowedly an atheist and agreed heartily with Santos Chocano who said that in order to combat their enemies they should not count on God or anyone

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<sup>21</sup>Rufino Blanco-Fombona, "El peligro de América y el augurio de la poesía," *Letras y letrados de Hispanoamérica* (París: Sociedad de Ediciones literarias y artísticas, 1908), p. 39.

<sup>22</sup>Rufino Blanco-Fombona, *La lámpara de Aladino* (Madrid: Renacimiento, 1915), p. 493.

but themselves. Again he disagreed with Darío who had claimed that the "yankee invaders" had everything except God, and implied, according to Fombona, that God was therefore on the side of the Hispanic race. Fombona reminded his compatriots that Catholic Spain counted on God, and her flag was swept from the sea by Protestant cannons. If we wish to become lost without hope of salvation, we should trust only in God, the Eternal Ally of the rich and strong.<sup>23</sup> He explained that the modernists of his day had not only cast aside the old verse forms of the Spaniards but in addition, "hemos desterrado de nuestras canciones a Dios, ese fantasma obsediante del espíritu medioeval de España."<sup>24</sup>

For a more representative philosophy of life he turned to stoicism and to Bolívar, the living example of his ideal. In *El espíritu de Bolívar* he said that if the religion of the majority is Catholicism, the philosophy of the better ones is "senequismo estoico y viril"—or, as he paraphrased—"In whatever situation you find yourself, never forget that you are a man."<sup>25</sup>

Blanco-Fombona was frankly disappointed with a whole generation of Argentine thinkers who by their own admission had not wanted anything in common with the Americans of their own origin, language, race, and culture. Argentines refer to other Latin Americans as *gente de tierra caliente* while their foreign minister in Spain says, "We are the continuation of Europe." He implied, as Blanco-Fombona said, that the rest of Latin America is the continuation of Africa. They believe that there are only two nations on the continent who can be taken seriously—the United States and Argentina.<sup>26</sup> It was inevitable that Fombona should cross pens with the Argentines—traditional defenders of San Martín against Bolívar. One might claim that by engaging in this nationalistic debate he might be censored for disturbing unity were it not for the fact that he has so clearly defined the Argentine position of his day.

If Fombona felt resentment toward the Argentine rebels, he

<sup>23</sup>Rufino Blanco-Fombona, "El peligro de América y el augurio de la poesía," *op. cit.*, p. 39.

<sup>24</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 15.

<sup>25</sup>Rufino Blanco-Fombona, *El espíritu de Bolívar* (Caracas: Impresores Unidos, 1943), p. 15.

<sup>26</sup>Rufino Blanco-Fombona, "Sarmiento," *Obras selectas*, ed. by Gabaldón Márquez (Madrid: Edime, 1958), p. 1027.

only had pity when he spoke of the problems of Puerto Rico.

There they have passed from the yoke of the Spaniards to the yoke of another power. Only that part of the island which is opposed to the yankee domination can represent the free spirit of America. The only men who can look the rest of us in the face are those like Hostos and José de Diego who have remained loyal to our ideology. Those who join with the oppressors are traitors. Bolívar and San Martín would have shot them.<sup>27</sup>

For Blanco-Fombona, then, Hispanic cultural unity is based on what he feels they have in common—their language, the Spanish race, the literary tradition, their religion or philosophy of life, their heritage from the conquistadores, and lastly their common enemy. In the face of what they foresaw as certain invasion by the yankees, the Latin Americans would have little difficulty in overcoming their small differences.

In most of Latin America today *hispanidad* is a lost cause. Few Latin Americans look to Spain for leadership in politics, economics, or even cultural affairs. But no matter how dead the cause may be because of political and economic difficulties, those who seek the common denominator of Hispanic culture must of necessity look to Spain as Blanco-Fombona did. He was aware of Spain's internal problems in his own day and projected them accurately into the future. Ironically enough, he foresaw clearly that the diffusion of the Spanish language and the culture of the Hispanic race was very closely related to the economic and commercial expansion of the Latin American Republics.

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<sup>27</sup>Rufino Blanco-Fombona, "La voz del ventrílocuo," *Obras Selectas*, ed. by Gabaldón Márquez (Madrid: Edime, 1958), p. 1134.