

In Memoriam: Frank Bonilla, Renaissance Man (1925–2010)

by SUSANNE JONAS | University of California, Santa Cruz | sjonas@ucsc.edu

I was privileged to know Frank Bonilla for forty-plus years, from my early graduate school days in Massachusetts through his retirement years in southern California. Without his mentoring, I would not have stuck with Latin American political studies in an era of cold war scholarship. Subsequently, in the 1970s–1990s, without his collegueship and intellectual influence, I would not have made the leap into Latino migration studies. I begin with this personal experience because I am only one of many whose careers and lives he touched, shaped, and enriched.

Frank was a multidimensional renaissance man. His early life as the son of Puerto Rican parents provided little material wealth but was very rich in instilling values for life. He experienced firsthand the realities of *barrio* life (in the Bronx and Harlem) and of racial discrimination in other venues and turned these experiences into a lifetime of struggle for social justice and for the rights of the poor, communities of color, and migrants. He must have been born with personal values of basic kindness and respect for those around him, for they characterized his entire eighty-five-year life.

Throughout his life, Frank was at the center of a large extended multigenerational family spread throughout the United States and Puerto Rico. *Familia* was always a priority for him, as he, himself, was a priority to his family. In his later years, his family relationships became all the more important. Even beyond his own family, Frank was generous with his time and energy to reach out to the families of close friends. He befriended my daughter when she came from San Francisco to attend college in New York City, and four years later, he was in the audience for her graduation recital.

As a scholar and professor, Frank began in the early 1960s with the American Universities Field Service in Latin America. He worked in Brazil, where he taught and wrote about agrarian reform and *favela* poverty, the issues of the day. While an associate professor at MIT (1963–1969), he did pioneering work in Venezuela with José Silva Michelena of the Centro de Estudios del Desarrollo, writing a piercing critique of the elites and foreign oil interests. Unlike many others during the 1960s, Frank rejected the career rewards of cold war scholarship and used his pen as a tool for social equality.

During his professorship at Stanford University (1969–1972) his graduate seminar “Structures of Dependency” became legendary, and students were profoundly transformed by it. In the words of one of those students, Carlos Vásquez, “*El Maestro* was not only brilliant in his capacity for analysis, but he also knew how to build confidence in young, inquisitive, and rebellious minds.”

It was after his return to New York in 1973, going back to his roots, that Frank made his most lasting contributions. He founded and for twenty years directed the City University of New York’s Centro de Estudios Puertorriqueños, eventually housed at Hunter College. The Centro was not without its challenges in the 1970s–1980s, but it was foundational. In the words of the Centro’s current director, Edwin Meléndez: “As I find more information about the creation of Centro and [its] 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 [the] Centro.”

One of Frank’s seminal collaborative studies, published by the Centro’s History Task Force, was *Labor Migration under Capitalism* (1979). While focused on the Puerto Rican experience, it became a paradigmatic work for understanding migration circuits and cycles, and a model for Latino migration and diaspora studies. As early as 1977, Frank had already begun writing about undocumented migrants, critiquing a U.S. governmental “Domestic Council on Illegal Aliens.” Very directly, then, Frank and his colleagues at the Centro paved the way for future generations of migration scholars. By the mid-1990s, he presented a global view:

“The increasing need for millions around the globe to anchor their existence in more than one social formation for generations at a time is transforming the very idea of citizenship, human rights, and the role of cultural expressions and identities in sustaining sociability.... What we are now stretching for, more urgently than ever, are new standards of international responsibility and solidarity.”

But the Centro was not simply one more unit for academic research. It was infused by Frank’s dedication to addressing the problems facing communities of color, such as the over-imprisonment of Afro-Americans and Latinos and the need to expand educational opportunities for these communities. Through New York City’s Puerto Rican Hispanic Leadership Forum and the Empowerment Institute of the Community Service Society (City of New York), to mention only two, Frank maintained direct advocacy involvement with the community. Nationally he served on the National Commission on Minorities in Higher Education, among other entities.

In 1986 Frank was appointed Thomas Hunter Professor of Sociology at Hunter, once again highlighting his teaching and mentoring, as well as research. His accumulated scholarship, his service, and the institutions he founded will survive to inspire new generations. A list of his publications, awards, and institutional involvements is available at the Centro's website <http://centopr.hunter.cuny.edu/sites/default/files/pictures/frank_final.pdf>.

Even as he directed the Centro, Frank was looking for new ways to create intellectual/institutional community. In 1983 he and three colleagues on other campuses initiated the founding of the Inter-University Program for Latino Research (IUPLR), which has united over twenty interdisciplinary research centers in Latino studies and created a national forum and voice on issues affecting Latino communities. The IUPLR's current director, Gilberto Cárdenas, writes, "I am forever grateful and indebted to Frank for the wisdom and guidance he provided me. He was a tremendous inspiration to us and his relentless support for interdisciplinary and pan-Latino scholarly inquiry across regions and borders has been a lasting hallmark for IUPLR."

Through the IUPLR, Frank and colleagues around the country progressively expanded the boundaries of collaborative research on Latinos in the Americas and in a globalizing economy, and on the Latinization of the United States. He coordinated the project "Latinos in a Changing U.S. Economy." As he wrote prophetically in 1994,

"Over the last several decades, Latinos in the U.S. have emerged as strategic actors in major processes of social transformation... The perception that Latinos are now positioned to share in bringing about change in the Americas from within the United States has increasingly taken hold...."

Within LASA, Frank, his colleagues, and former students played an important role in founding the Latino Studies section. He also participated in LASA panels designed to pinpoint the role of Latino Studies, as well as Latinos and migrants, and published in the *Latin American Research Review*.

At the same time, in various direct and indirect ways, beginning in the 1990s, he was at the forefront of a developing a new academic approach that established links and demonstrated the growing interdependence between Latin America and Latinos, and between Latin American Studies and Latino Studies. For example, at several key moments, he influenced our movement toward dialogue between the two fields, despite their different origins and worldviews, at the University of California, Santa Cruz, as we transformed our Latin American Studies department into a department of Latin American and Latino Studies.

Frank was always pushing the limits of existing scholarship and breaking new intellectual ground. He never viewed the production of knowledge as an individual task. He was always seeking input from those around him, at the dining table or around the ironing board at home, or in his office or those of colleagues at the university, revising and perfecting phrases for a speech he had to give the next day or finalizing an article for a looming deadline.

Frank influenced untold numbers of scholars over the course of several generations, and throughout the hemisphere, from Brazil to New York. His life, as well as his scholarship, exemplified, furthered, and opened up new possibilities for North-South collaboration within the Americas. He had a vision that spanned national boundaries long before this became more common. He will be greatly

missed by thousands of scholars and colleagues, many of them also close friends, across the nation, the hemisphere, and beyond.

A public tribute to Frank was held at El Centro de Estudios Puertorriqueños, Hunter College, on June 9, 2011. Frank Bonilla, *¡Presente!*

[Note: This "In Memoriam" is revised and expanded from a version written for the May, 2011 issue of *Latin American Perspectives*.] ■