

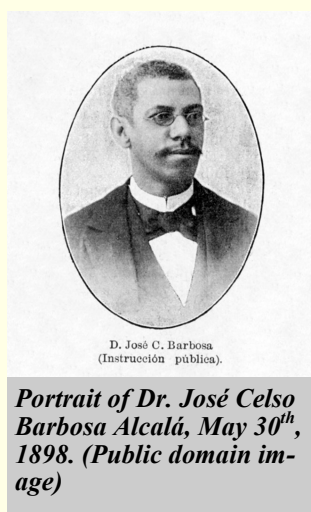


Original article

Nunca Vamos a Rendirnos: The Enduring Legacy of Dr. José Celso Barbosa in Medicine and Social Justice

Guadalupe Jose Rodriguez

The University of Texas Medical Branch, Galveston, Texas



Introduction

In the grand tapestry of Puerto Rican and Afro-Latinx history, Dr. José Celso Barbosa Alcalá (1857-1921) stands out as a figure of unyielding determination, intellectual brilliance, and moral courage. Widely recognized as the “Father of Puerto Rican Statehood,” Barbosa’s life intertwined medicine, social justice, and political advocacy in unprecedented ways.

Born in 1857 in Bayamón, Puerto Rico, during a period when slavery was still legal on the island, Barbosa grew up amidst the hierarchical structures that Spanish colonialism created and which placed Black Puerto Ricans at the bottom of social, economic, and educational systems. Despite this, he was exceptionally intelligent and demonstrated a fierce commitment to challenging these limitations early on. His rise from poverty to become the first Puerto Rican to graduate from a U.S. medical school, and later one of Puerto Rico’s most influential political leaders, illustrates the transformative potential of education, perseverance, and moral conviction.

This manuscript explores Barbosa’s biography beginning from his early life under Spanish colonial rule and his educational struggles in the United States to his contributions to public health and his leadership in Puerto Rican politics.

Growing Up in Colonial Puerto Rico

José Celso Barbosa Alcalá was born on July 27, 1857, in Bayamón, Puerto Rico, during a time when slavery remained legal and racial hierarchies structured daily life. He was the son of Hermógenes Barbosa, a brick mason and overseer of the San Antonio sugar mill, and Carmen Alcalá, a seamstress (1).

Barbosa’s birth occurred during the height of sugar plantation economies that dominated Puerto Rico and the Caribbean. More importantly, slavery was not abolished in Puerto Rico until March 22, 1873, therefore Barbosa spent his formative years witnessing firsthand the dehumanizing effects of slavery and

racialized systems. As a Black child born free but surrounded by enslaved people, Barbosa lived at the intersections of racial caste systems that defined social mobility in the Spanish colonial empire. While his access to advanced education was limited by his family's poverty, his maternal aunt, Lucia Alcalá, whom he called "Mama Lucia", ensured he would not be confined by these limitations. Her unbreakable faith in his potential and the sacrifices she made for his schooling became the foundation that shaped his life.

Seminary Education Amidst Racial Hierarchies

In 1870, at the age of thirteen, Barbosa enrolled in the Seminario Conciliar de San Ildefonso in Old San Juan, the only secondary institution on the island. He broke a longstanding racial barrier in an institution traditionally reserved for the white criollo elite by being the first mulatto student admitted (2). Although he overcame the challenge of being admitted to this institution as a Black Puerto Rican, his years there were marked by social isolation due to pervasive racism and a society that did not recognize the right of the children of workers to become professionals (3). Teachers and classmates frequently belittled him for his dark skin and poor background, reinforcing the colonial caste system that sought to limit the aspirations of Black Puerto Ricans.

Despite this hostile environment, Barbosa excelled academically, mastering subjects such as Latin, philosophy, rhetoric, and classical literature. He graduated in 1875, at the age of eighteen, with honors. These formative years convinced him of the power of education as a tool for liberation and personal dignity. Yet they also made him acutely aware that intellectual achievement alone could not erase the entrenched racism of colonial society, a tension that would remain central throughout his life.

Facing Racial Discrimination in Higher Education

After graduating, Barbosa saved enough money to pursue a higher education in the United States by working as a private tutor for the children of Mr. José Escolástico Berríos, owner of the San Antonio Sugar Mill (3). On October 19, 1876, he traveled to New York City and enrolled at the Fort Edward Collegiate Institute to master English. He was initially inspired to pursue a degree in Law or Engineering by Puerto Rican intellectuals who advocated for legal reforms against Spanish colonialism (4). However, his plans changed after suffering through a severe case of pneumonia. His physician, Dr. Wendell, recognized Barbosa's analytical mind and relentless desire to serve others and suggested he pursue medicine.

It was this pivotal moment which led Barbosa to apply to Columbia University's College of Physicians and Surgeons in 1877. Despite his academic brilliance and recommendations, Columbia rejected his application solely due to his race. The minutes from a faculty meeting discussing Barbosa's application stated, "Resolved, that from this date forward this College will decline to receive 'colored' applicants for matriculation," (5). This blatant discrimination exemplified the exclusion African and Latinx students faced in American educational institutions, a legacy that continues to impact underrepresented minorities today.

Undeterred, Barbosa applied to the University of Michigan Medical School. After initial hesitation, the institution accepted him, marking him as its first Puerto Rican student and one of its earliest Afro-Latino medical students (6). His admission received mixed reviews but surprisingly a student publication, *The Chronicle*, praised his admission and emphasized merit over racial background, stating, "We have no hesitancy in saying that Mr. Barbosa will have the right hand of fellowship extended to him from every side...young gentlemen of sufficient ability are admitted on equal footing irrespective of complexion. It not being the amount of pigment matter deposited in the skin that is sought after; but the quantity and quality of the brains in the cranium" (5).

During his years from 1877 to 1880, Barbosa excelled academically despite enduring racial segregation in housing and social life. On July 1st, 1880, Barbosa graduated as valedictorian, becoming the first Puerto Rican to earn a U.S. medical degree and solidifying his place as a pioneer in Afro-Latinx medical history.

Returning to Puerto Rico: Contributions to Medicine and the Structural Barriers

Upon his return to Puerto Rico in late 1880, Dr. José Celso Barbosa faced three immediate barriers to practicing medicine. The first was being a working-class man, the second was being the first black physician, and the third was holding a diploma from an American university (3). Spanish colonial authorities refused to recognize his U.S. medical degree, asserting that only European credentials were valid for licensure. It was only through direct intervention by the American consulate that Barbosa's degree was eventually recognized, allowing him to begin clinical work (4).

Once he was allowed to practice medicine, Barbosa immediately established his own medical practice in San Juan which focused on Afro-Puerto Rican and impoverished communities that were historically excluded from healthcare systems. He quickly gained recognition for his innovative treatment protocols, particularly during a smallpox epidemic where his American-based vaccination and isolation practices saved countless lives. It was at his clinic where patients, regardless of their ability to pay, were treated with dignity and received the care they desperately needed. Barbosa recognized that healthcare was a human right and this strong conviction to provide care for all patients, regardless of social or economic status, was what drove his professional life.

His contribution to healthcare did not stop at his clinic. Perhaps his most revolutionary contribution to public health was his advocacy for employer-supported health insurance. Under this model, employers paid a fixed fee in advance to cover future medical care for their workers and families. This concept, introduced decades before similar systems in Europe and the U.S., reflected Barbosa's vision for structural solutions to health disparities (2).

Barbosa also advanced medical education in Puerto Rico by joining the faculty at the Ateneo Científico y Literario. He taught natural history, anatomy, obstetrics and midwifery, fields central to public health and maternal-child care at the time (1). His lectures integrated American clinical innovations with local traditional knowledge. His insistence on rigorous science coupled with community-centered ethics left a lasting mark on generations of Puerto Rican physicians.

Early Political Involvement: Liberal Reformist and Autonomist Movements

Barbosa's involvement in politics began in 1883 with the Liberal Reformist Party, advocating for moderate reforms within the colonial government. He later joined the Autonomist Party, working alongside Puerto Rican intellectuals who sought greater local governance while still under Spanish rule (7). In 1897, Barbosa co-founded the Orthodox autonomist party which believed in expanding autonomy while rejecting political compromises that helped the Spanish maintain dominance. Although Barbosa understood that colonial rule denied many of the goals of the Orthodox Autonomist Party, he continued to argue for policies which would uplift Puerto Ricans economically and socially (1).

Founding the Republican Party and Advocacy for Statehood

The U.S. invasion of Puerto Rico in 1898 during the Spanish-American War presented new possibilities and contradictions. On December 10, 1898, the Treaty of Paris was signed effectively bringing the end to the Spanish-American War. With this, Puerto Rico was acquired by the United States along with Guam, the Philippines and Cuba from Spain. For Puerto Rico, this marked the beginning of a new prolonged struggle to secure democratic rights and political representation under the United States. While the American Republican system held its own racial flaws, Barbosa believed it offered a pathway to civil rights and social advancement for the people of Puerto Rico. Therefore, he founded the Republican Party of Puerto Rico on July 4, 1899 to advocate statehood as the path to constitutional rights and full political participation for Puerto Ricans (7). As Barbosa declared, "We aspire to be another State within the Union in order to affirm the personality of the Puerto Rican people" (7). This was not a call for assimilation but rather a demand for full constitutional rights and political power for Puerto Ricans (7).

Service in the Executive Cabinet and Senate

In 1900, the Foraker Act established a civil government in Puerto Rico, marking a new chapter in

the island's political landscape. Under this system, Dr. Barbosa was named by President William McKinley to serve as part of an Executive Cabinet under U.S.-appointed Governor Charles H. Allen. In this role, he oversaw public health, education, and county administration (8). Once again, his experience was marked by tension, this time by Americans and local elites who were skeptical of Puerto Rican leadership and threatened by his advocacy for Afro-Puerto Rican rights.

In 1917, the Jones-Shafroth Act granted U.S citizenship to the people of Puerto Rico and restructured the island's government. The act established a bicameral legislature composed of a Senate and a House of Representatives, and divided the government into executive, legislative, and judicial branches. Dr. Barbosa would be elected as a Senator and became the first minority leader in the Puerto Rican Senate, a role he held until his death in 1921. During his time in the Senate, he focused on universal suffrage, public education, healthcare expansion, and labor protections.

Final Years and Death

Dr. José Celso Barbosa passed away on September 21, 1921, in San Juan, while still serving as a Senator. He made such an immense effort to make change that his loss was felt by supporters and opponents alike, who recognized his lifelong dedication to Puerto Rico's advancement (2). Newspapers across political lines published obituaries commemorating his contributions as a physician, educator, and leader.

Dr. José Celso Barbosa was survived by his wife, Jacinta Belén Sánchez Jiménez De Barbosa (1863-1928), who together had eleven children, several of whom followed paths in education, medicine, and public service (4). Their daughter Pilar Barbosa de Rosario (1898-1997) emerged as a leading figure in Puerto Rican intellectual and political life, becoming the island's first female Official Historian in 1993 and a lifelong advocate for statehood and civic education (4). Among their sons, Robert C. Barbosa (1895-1984) pursued a career in dentistry, and Guillermo H. Barbosa (1889-1972) became a surgeon (4). While detailed records of their remaining eight children are limited in the historical archive, the Barbosa family reflects a legacy of service, professionalism, and commitment to the values Dr. Barbosa championed throughout his life.

Today, Barbosa's memory is honored through a public holiday on July 27th which is declared José Celso Barbosa Day and his childhood home in Bayamón which serves as a museum to preserve his achievements. Additionally, there are several named sites such as highways (PR-53), Third Millennium Park, schools and public buildings, as well as a U.S. Post Office appointed under Public Law 109-253.

Critical Reflections on Barbosa's Views of Race and Meritocracy

Barbosa actively supported racial equality, but his approach was rooted in meritocracy. He strongly believed that Afro-Puerto Ricans could overcome prejudice through education, moral character, and professional achievements. He stated, "Black! Black! Black! I am proud of being a Negro. Nor have I ever tried to beg tolerance from anyone. Superiority is not proved by color, but by the brain, by education, by willpower, by moral courage" (5).

Modern scholars argue that while his focus on individual excellence challenged stereotypes, it did not address the structural issues of racism at a systemic level (6). His life thus reflects both an inspiring model of Afro-Latinx achievement and of using an approach like colorblind meritocracy in dismantling racial hierarchies.

Why His Legacy Matters Today

Barbosa's journey displays the experiences of Afro-Latinx students who continue to navigate a system and institutions that were historically structured to exclude them. Barbosa was listed merely as a "Negro man" at the University of Michigan Medical School, erasing his Puerto Rican identity in official records despite his academic excellence (6). Afro-Latinx students today continue to experience racial microaggressions, systemic bias, and remain underrepresented. Barbosa's life demonstrates that an individual can challenge stereotypes within a society, but true equity requires transformation at a systemic level.

Moreover, Barbosa's rejection from Columbia University on the basis of his race reflects barriers that persist in elite academic institutions. Afro-Latinx scholars continue to advocate for equity in admissions, inclusive curricula, and anti-racist policies to dismantle legacies of exclusion that date back centuries. Barbosa's perseverance despite the barriers he faced remains an everlasting model of resilience, but it highlights the moral need to change systems so that resilience is not required for marginalized students to succeed.

Public Health Leadership and Structural Interventions

Barbosa's vision for employer-supported health insurance prefigured modern concepts of occupational health coverage, a model that expanded globally in the 20th century (2). His work continues to make an impact by challenging current healthcare systems to design policies that not only address treatments but also places an emphasis on prevention and social determinants of health. His approach aligns with modern ideas of competency within medicine, which calls on physicians to not only have knowledge of the complexities of the diseases which afflict their patients, but also to understand how socioeconomic systems create and perpetuate these diseases.

His dedication to serving Afro-Puerto Rican laborers, who were disproportionately affected by infectious disease outbreaks and poor working conditions, remains relevant today. Afro-descendant populations continue to face disproportionate burdens of chronic illness, infectious disease, and limited access to culturally competent care. Barbosa's integration of clinical innovation with community advocacy serves as an example of how effective public health requires addressing the root cause of these inequalities within medicine, education, and labor practices.

Political Status Debates, Decolonization, and Racial Democracy

There continues to be debates about Barbosa's advocacy for Puerto Rican statehood and the island's political future. His vision of using statehood as a pathway to civil rights was rooted in his belief that American Republicanism would offer greater constitutional rights. However, modern scholars critique his vision as they believe he underestimated the racism of the U.S. as well as imperialism within the states. Statehood could theoretically secure rights for Puerto Ricans, but at the cost of assimilation without addressing the colonial exploitation that Puerto Ricans underwent. (1).

Furthermore, Barbosa embraced racial democracy believing education and moral character could overcome racism. This was a reflection of ideas common amongst Black leaders in this time, such as Booker T. Washington. Yet his vision did not fully address the extent to which racism was embedded within the law, economics, and political institutions. Today, movements directed towards dismantling racism build off his work while also recognizing that there needs to be change within oppressive systems to combat racism.

A Call to Medical Professionals

For current and future physicians, Barbosa's life offers a framework of inspiration. His story exemplifies the power of perseverance, education, and advocacy to drive social change and improve community well-being. His work as a clinician, politician, and public health advocate serves as a blueprint for holistic care within medicine. His journey cautions us from relying on meritocracy as a solution to systemic issues and allows us to incorporate competency, humility, and advocacy to transform healthcare systems that continue to marginalize poor, black, Indigenous, and immigrant communities.

Conclusion

"Nunca vamos a rendirnos" translates to "we will never surrender". This statement is an embodiment of Dr. José Celso Barbosa's life. His journey is a testament to how intelligence, compassion, and resilience can overcome the barriers of oppression. Yet his story also reminds us that true justice is never fully achieved through individual success alone; it demands collective action to dismantle structural racism, economic injustice, and colonial domination.

In the words of Sir William Osler, “The practice of medicine is an art, not a trade... a calling in which your heart will be exercised equally with your head” (9). Dr. José Celso Barbosa experienced this truth in his daily life. He saw medicine not merely as a career but as a calling to advance justice, to empower the disenfranchised, and to build institutions that protect and uplift human dignity.

At a time when healthcare inequities continue to affect marginalized communities and Puerto Rico struggles for political and economic justice, Barbosa's enduring legacy calls for each of us to take action. May his life and the path he paved for us give us the courage to challenge oppressive systems, instill in us the compassion to heal beyond the bedside, and fill us with conviction to create a more equitable world.

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Biography:

Guadalupe Jose Rodriguez was born and raised in Houston, Texas. He completed his undergraduate education at the University of St. Thomas where he majored in Cell and Molecular Biology and a minor in Psychology with a focus on pre-medical studies. Inspired by the healthcare and socioeconomic challenges his community faced, he pursued a career in medicine to maximize his efforts towards bringing change.

Guadalupe is currently a second-year medical student at the University of Texas Medical Branch in Galveston. At UTMB, he is actively involved in organizations that support underrepresented minority students in medicine and aims to promote diversity in healthcare leadership. His long-term goal is to become a physician who not only practices medicine but also shapes healthcare policy to better serve marginalized populations. He aspires to integrate public health advocacy with clinical practice and is especially passionate about reducing disparities in Latino communities across Texas and the nation. guadrodr@utmb.edu