

Racial relations in Cuba

Reflexions

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“To be Cuban is to be more than White, more than Mulatto, more than Black”

José Martí

For more than 10 years I have been immersed in research projects about today’s racial relations in Cuba. With no desire to be apologetic, I maintain the position that racial equality in our country (despite its imperfections, frequently manipulated by individuals who not always bear good intentions) constitutes a unique paradigm, recognized by many in the context of multiracial American societies.

This situation responds to the specific qualities that pertain to the ethno-genesis and to the consolidation process of the Cuban people—topics we do not intend to elaborate in this article. However, in the sense that they permitted us to reach certain levels of socio-racial integration, its principal guideposts can be summarized as follows ⁽¹⁾

-the various racial fusions, though marked by domination and exploitation from the beginning of the Conquest and Colonization. This is when Indians, Spaniards and Africans began to create the racial blend that defines us, and to make their cultural contributions to the rich process of transculturation that was barely commencing⁽²⁾.

-the late development of the plantation slave economy in big scale, beginning in the late 18th C. This made possible the existence of a relatively large social class of Blacks and freed Creoles who, with relative social mobility, would live and mix with Whites of similar or nearly equal social status.

-the participation of Whites, Blacks and even ‘Yellow’ men together in the Independence Wars between 1868 and 1898, during which an important number of Blacks and Creoles reached high level positions in the military structure.

-the insertion, particularly during the second half of the 20th Century, of the Black and Mulatto struggle for their rights into the strategies of the labor movement and the leftist political parties. This struggle took place within the framework of class confrontations in support of social justice and was seriously compromised by racial discrimination ⁽³⁾

- beginning in the 1930’s, the recognition of the African contribution to Cuban culture in the cultural ambit, and the penetration of African cultural and religious elements into the dominant White culture.

-the triumph of the Cuban Revolution that meant ample possibilities of progress

and experiences

for all, including for those sectors of the population considered dispossessed and which largely coincided with the Black and Creole masses. Already since 1959, Fidel Castro's speeches and interventions called out to fight against discrimination and racial prejudice, with particular emphasis on the need to combat the limitations of access to employment, schools and recreation centers ⁽⁴⁾.

-the dynamics of the classist structure of the 80's, which reached high levels of equality throughout Cuban society.

These are the fundamental pillars that hold our initial assertion. Our own research ⁽⁵⁾ and those that precede it, such as the Ethnographic Atlas of Cuba ⁽⁶⁾, bring to light the high level of integration and consolidation reached by Cuban ethnic groups, to the point that there are common features that, lacking substantial differences, are part of every Cuban regardless of the socio-racial group or geographical region he or she may belong to.

Consequently, it is difficult if not impossible to uncover any difference among the various racial groups in areas such as foods, dressing, music, dance (except those pertaining to religious practices) and sports. It is not even possible to

find any in socio-normative elements such as values, behavioral codes, interpersonal relations, etc. A stronger racial connotation can be found in the cultural arena when it comes to living environments, spiritual culture, the religious complex and even inter-racial relationships.

Well, now it is necessary to point out the influence of three fundamental factors:

-the peculiarities of the ethno-historic and socioeconomic development of the various regions of Cuba, which determine



Cuban students

the different expressions of the problem that concerns us ⁽⁷⁾

-ethno-cultural particularities, conditioned by the Afro-Hispanic interaction, that gave birth to the Cuban multi-racial reality. This reality is expressed in various racial components that kept, particularly in

its spiritual culture, the qualities of their origin.

-the classist dimension of the Cuban culture, with the reproduction of vital forms in agreement with the real life conditions of the various social class groups.

The last two elements, the ethno-cultural particularities and the social class differences, are very inter-related as they coincide throughout most of our history with our categories of "race" and class, given that Blacks are the majority at the base of the social pyramid. This tie becomes important in the methodological approach to this topic in general: it is necessary to take into consideration the group characteristics that are due to the different ethno-cultural contributions on one side. On the other, we must consider the national factors of the socio-economic and historic development of the island. Only by analyzing the inter-relationship between both phenomena can we become more objective toward the topic. The preponderance of one factor or another is at the root of many of the prejudices and racial stereotypes still valid among the Cuban population.

So, research has shown that racial inequalities are maintained among the working class social structure. The differences among these social classes are found manifested in their living environments. It is evident that Whites reside more frequently in the residential zones, the same neighborhoods that before 1959 had been inhabited by the different levels of the bourgeoisie. On the other hand, Blacks and Creoles make up the majority in the poor neighborhoods, within which we can find the worst living conditions such as "faceless" and "cuddles".

These conditions are the ones that generate the cultural patterns and life styles that reproduce inequalities and that become the very breeding ground for prejudices and racial stereotypes: Blacks are therefore

unconsciously and spontaneously identified with cultural characteristics associated with those who live in the poorest areas.

On the other hand, the spiritual cultural differences, particularly those related to the African religious heritage, become obvious due to their particular ethno-cultural origins even though they are spread throughout large sectors of the population.

Everything we have presented tries to explain the hues of the present situation, without covering up what the socio-economic and ideological colonial system brought with it: objective and subjective inequalities that have marked racial relations in Cuba and that can still be seen today.

In summary, we can understand the complexity of the issue when we become aware, in the first place, of those deep transculturation processes that mark the ethnogenesis of the Cuban population, the deep racial mixture that defines it. Then, we must also mention those racial characteristics that remain in the group: socio-economic and ethno-cultural characteristics. Last, but not least, we must also highlight the lack of objectivity in all that is related to racial identity and social relations.

People thought that the racial problem was resolved with the triumph of the Revolution after which a phase of total silence about the topic ensued. So when we began to explore the problem anew in the 1990's, our interest was received with lack of understanding and even with disdain.

But the crisis of what is called "the special period" brought with it the deepening of all types of social inequalities and made apparent that there were structural problems that placed Blacks and Mulattoes at a disadvantage to confront them. All this was accompanied by the resurgence of a whole complex of racial prejudices and stereotypes that reflected not only the old White ideology of slavery times, but also

new mechanisms that continue to reproduce them .

These are some of the findings of our research. All these years, they have been the object of heated debates in all the forums where they have been presented. We have been, schematically speaking, navigating between two waters. On one side, there are those who still deny the need to deal with the problem and to include it among the country's socio-political priorities. Those accuse us of being apocalyptic, of making the problem appear larger than it actually is. On the other side, there are those who accuse us of taking the "official" position, of trying to 'sweeten' the issue. These, almost always Black, reject our orientation toward a Cuban cultural unity.

Among the latter group there are those who subscribe to the defense of the Afro-Cuban, of Negritude, of a Black culture as something particular only to Black Cubans. We don't have anything against that terminology, risen in the popular literature (particularly that of Fernando Ortiz) to classify cultural phenomena related to Blacks or to those of African origin.

The cultural phenomena we refer to are, without any doubt, a qualitatively new product, different from Cuban-ness. The characteristics that weigh the most are those that unite us and identify us as Cubans, making us participants in a stable ethnic conglomerate with a strong sense of identity and belonging-ness, with characteristics that distinguish us from other national groups. There is a basic but very convincing argument among the interviewees through all these years regardless of their race: they all consider themselves to be Cuban, before being White, Black, or Mulatto, and they never bring into the conversation their racial ancestry from the start.

Furthermore, when I have been considered professionally unqualified in this arena due my White skin and relative

youth, I cannot resist the temptation to share some of my own personal experiences.

I grew up in a home where there was seemingly no preoccupation with the racial topic. One of my grandmother's closest friends was Black and was considered part of our family, she and my grandmother had helped each other with child-raising, particularly in difficult times. My parents divorced and my father's new wife was Mulatto, and to add, so were my new brothers. In school, in the neighborhood, in the parks, we were friendly with people of all "colors".

I grew up assuming that the color of the skin was just one more physical trait: to be White, Black or Mulatto had the same connotation as being tall or short, thin or fat. I do not hesitate to affirm that that was the same vision for most of my generation, those born in the 60's, those who grew up influenced by deep social transformations due to the Revolution. These changes were clearly expressed most particularly when it came to racial relations.

And so I became an adolescent and had my first boyfriend, a "Moor"⁽⁸⁾ with very dark skin. They forbid me from having this relationship supposedly because I needed to dedicate my time to studying. But my boyfriend's mother accused my family of racism, and although I thought she had been unfair, life proved her right.

I began to suspect I had been wrong when the same thing happened to my oldest sister. Later on I became convinced when I, already an adult, married a Mulatto and my family became overwhelmed with concern over what color my children would be. Now, are my daughters "Afro-" or "Hispanic-Cuban"? Do we, as their parents, carry a different cultural patrimony? It is obvious that the topic of racial relations is of general interest to all Cubans.⁽⁹⁾

The problem of the classification of racial groups, which is of cardinal methodological importance in researching this topic, demonstrates the richness and variety of racial mixture that typifies our people. Cases of wrong identification are not rare given the multiple phenotypical possibilities that are part of our reality, putting aside any racial origin—skin color and hair type, facial features, etc. So, the nomenclature of the various phenotypes—Mulattoes, jabaos”, Moors, etc. — are not mutually exclusive many times, and respond to the personal judgment call of the viewer. The color of the skin of the viewer and the environment that surrounds him or her can determine that those who look White or Black for some can be seen as Creole by others or vice versa.

So, we also include those situations where self-affiliation makes people think they belong to a particular racial group, but do not admit that others, by observation, may categorize them in a different racial grouping. Others may self-identify as belonging to a group or another due to their appearance (“they pass”). It should be underlined that in general people recognize racial mixing within families.

In the end, the issue is not to obviate the peculiarities of specific groups. It is a matter of stressing the multi-racial quality of all the expressions of the Cuban culture. To highlight the unity does not contradict or make less important the recognition and defense of specific qualities, much less the need to fight against socio-economic differences that affect above all the Black and Creole population. It is a matter of finding the exact equilibrium between cultural unity and heterogeneity, given the concept of unity in diversity, in order to clear the road toward an even stronger integration of our national culture.

Notes and Bibliography

- (1) From the literature about this topic it is worth to highlight among others Dechamps, 1971; Duharte, 1988; Helf 2000; Leon, 1989; Ortiz, 1940 and 1941; Torres-Nuevas, 2001.
- (2) Be aware that most the first groups of Spaniards were formed by mostly men.
- (3) the expectations of equality that were nurtured during the Wars of Independence and during the Abolition of Slavery were frustrated in the Republic. In 1908, the Partido de los Independientes de Color (Party of Free People of Color) was created speaking for the full integration of Blacks and Mulattos into society and for the end of racial discrimination, and not for separatism from Whites. During its short existence this Party was discredited by the White elite, and was accused of racism against Whites. Its members were victims to many forms of repression which eventually led them to take up arms in Oriente in 1912. This ended up in a racist massacre which ended every attempt by Blacks and Mulattoes to fight for their rights. This constitutes one of the most shameful passages in our History (See Helf, 2000).
- (4) Castro, 1989
- (5) The research was carried out in three themes: the inter-relationship of the class and racial structure in the social-working class context; the ethno-cultural characterization of the various racial groups, and the dynamism of the racial prejudices and stereotypes, its expressions and surviving factors in social environments of cities such as Havana, Santa Clara and Santiago de Cuba (See Colectivo de Autores, 1993-2004)

- (6) Colectivo de Autores, 2000
- (7) Some notes only: The western region was the one where the sugar plantation developed the most, and a large number of slaves concentrated there during the 19th Century. This area was also the principal receiver of Chinese who came during the third decade of the 19th Century. The center of the island was dedicated to cattle raising, and Whites were the majority. The eastern part of the island, Oriente, was where most Blacks and free Mulattoes lived, and also where the Indian element appears the strongest, although already racially mixed. This is also where the French, and the French-Haitian elements were incorporated after the Haitian Revolution
- (8) Black skin and more or less straight hair is one of the many terms used to catalogue the many gradations of racial mixture in the Cuban population.
- (9) This goes beyond pure anecdote. This points to what takes place in the interpersonal relationships: the existence of racial prejudices and stereotypes do not influence the daily conduct of individuals, except those more intimate ones of couples. Even in those there is greater flexibility among the youth. We cannot deny that there is a deeper biological and socio-cultural integration among Cubans, and that there are very strong friendship and solidarity between individuals of all racial groups.

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