

# Cuba: Where do we stand relative to the nation?

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There is a recurring question on the problem of race in Cuba: is there really a debate on the fundamental issue of the total realization of the Cuban nation? My answer is “no”. What is controversial about this discussion today has more to do with what the revolution has or has not done to integrate blacks than with the question of what blacks mean to the nation.

First we should focus on how the revolution becomes part of the national psyche so as to later approach the topic of blacks as part of the nation. My working hypothesis is that the further the Cuban revolution distances itself from the national integration process, the further away the possibility of resolving the issue of black participation in the national project becomes. I would say that today blacks are less integrated into the Cuban nation than in 1959. Discrimination, itself, does not reflect a lack of integration into the national fabric: one can be integrated while being subordinated.

This forces me to take a necessary detour into the nature of the revolution itself. The Cuban revolution is national and nationalist in one way only: it reproduces the model of the European nationalist movements of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. These essentially projected themselves outwards: Holland against Spain, France against Germany, Poland against Russia. Observed from the inside, though, the Cuban revolution's nationalist content withers to the extent that its focus, challenges, projection and roadmap acquire motives that are universal but of a eurocentrist nature. World revolution, proletarian internationalism, socialist economy, social equality, a proletarian culture and Marxism-Leninism convert the Cuban revolution into one more universal *locus* that as it deepens becomes increasingly detached from its own tradition, roots and cultural dynamics.

The tension existing between the imported motives that make of the Cuban revolution a socialist one, the fact that from outside Cuba it is viewed negatively, which make it a Third World revolution, subordinates blacks further into their cultural depths within Cuban reality and uproot them from the framework of the nation's development.

I believe it's important to clarify this dynamic: even through subordination there can be integration. Throughout the colonial period, blacks became integrated into society, even as they were subjugated. Once the Spaniards allowed the reproduction of the black religious and cultural world within the slave quarters, they in fact aided the establishment of a national melting pot where dance, body language, verbal expressions, laughter and other characteristics of the black way of thinking were interwoven into the fabric of the dominant culture. Thus, Cuba was formed and blacks became incorporated even while the nation was incorporating itself. Were blacks subjugated? Certainly. Exploited? Of course. But they were becoming Cuban right alongside the Spaniards.

The essentially religious masking of this reality is part of a collective psychological necessity that fooled neither blacks nor Spaniards. It was a necessity brought on by the need to adhere to the public mores of the society at large. The later participation of blacks in the wars of independence opened, if somewhat tensely, the path towards the possibility for blacks to potentially be able to acquire full political citizenship in the emerging, fledgling Cuban republic of which they were already cultural citizens. Racism prevented the fulfillment of this conversion and tensions between Cubans (white and black) tarnished the path towards the total realization of the nation. Black societies provide an interesting way of understanding this tension: they are a bridge

between what makes a black person African and what makes him or her European, while still being black. In other words, becoming an economic, social and political citizen without having to become white.

There is another dynamic within which subordination can conversely bring about the social disintegration that began to occur with the Cuban revolution.

I'll begin by describing in positive fashion a very concrete effect that exists within the metaphysical nature of all ideological revolutions. As an all-encompassing political event, that is, as a Eurocentric political event, the Cuban revolution sought to incorporate all Cubans without distinction. There weren't blacks or whites, rather a bourgeoisie to destroy and proletarians to emancipate.

The equality of the downtrodden is a goal that does not have any relation to the color of one's skin; it simply has to do with a need to be able to participate in the economic, social and cultural wealth by those who earlier were doubly exploited by the previous regime; through class subordination and by national subordination to foreign interests. Social barriers that heretofore had established more or less rigid differentiations began to "disappear" and blacks and whites began or have to begin to partake equally of all that society had to offer.

For this to happen, the end of racial discrimination occurred more by decree than through an open debate and a cultural eradication of this malaise. Otherwise, the revolution would be forced to admit that racial discrimination still exists alongside, or within it, even as it declares political and social equality. Emancipatory revolutions are not a matter of evolutionary processes but rather of radical action. All the "bad" that is inherited is eradicated through the very expression of revolutionary will.

From the negative perspective, the Cuban revolution combines three difficult processes that begin to plow a path towards a national disintegration of blacks and their safe haven in what I shall describe, for the time being, as an ethnic republic. The first process is that it is a revolution carried out within the parameters of an elite of Spanish origin, whose cultural workings were still very much alive in 1959. It's important to remember that immigration from Spain to Cuba continued until the 1930s, with all that implies in reference to the apex of cultural racism in Cuba.

The second of these processes has to do with the cultural cleansing, or ethnic neutralization that comes from the imposition of Marxist-Leninist indoctrination upon the Cuban social, cultural and political curriculum. From this perspective, being Cuban, or continuing to be Cuban, is predicated first upon the acceptance of the revolution and, secondly, by accepting the teachings of Marx and Lenin. Culturally and ideologically speaking, a Cuban has to become a sort of caucasian. The third process has to do with the Stalinist notion that tries to find *the new man*, in the anthropological sense and, consequently, rejects the rich magical-religious world expressed by black culture. As these three processes acquire more and more political power, the more totally devastating they are to blacks.

This comparison will allow for a better understanding of the following: during the colonial period, the imposition of Catholicism loses strength to the extent that State and religion begin to drift apart, tolerating and professing indifference towards cultural practices of African origin. This is why black culture penetrates forcefully into the Cuban national essence. During the republican period the process is even more clearly visible, allowing blacks to integrate into civil society. During

the revolutionary period, however, the State and the new modern religion, embodied in Marxism, unite to block the path to a cultural inheritance that they find incompatible. In this trifecta, blacks lose in the face of the inherent racism of Old Spain and against the new “emancipatory” ideologies that, paradoxically, offer them more social opportunities and a greater sense of equality.

The greatest consequence of all this is the alienation of blacks from the Cuban nation in exchange for a new kind of subordination that requires some sort of an entry permit into the new Cuban national identity.

What in the long term was supposed to be social progress becomes instead an expulsion from the new parameters that begin to rule absolutely in Cuba. In the revolution, blacks become some sort of more or less taken care of social refugees who have to shoulder three extremely cumbersome loads: a rejection, through Catholicism and Marxism, of their culture as regards its potential social impact; the impossibility of their participation in higher

echelons of politics because of a lack of cultural sophistication; and their cultural isolation because the elite is not ready to admit a black person who practices Afro-Cuban religion, speaks to African deities, and is more interested in personal pleasure than in the *savoir-faire* of a modern and competitive society.

So, where do blacks fit within the revolution? In their ethnic republic that, as time passes, becomes part of and is absorbed by innumerable fragmented social ghettos throughout the island; and in the accelerated race towards becoming white that, truth be told, allows them entry, albeit subordinated, into the political, cultural and economic elite created by the revolution. This last sector represents a subgroup of blacks who are useful for revolutionary public relations and, when integrated amongst the majority of blacks in Cuba, as an example of inclusion.

If their culture, that is, the sole basic foundation upon which blacks have entry into the national fabric, is denied; if social and cultural paths are obstructed because they imply a



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forced Marxist universalization; and if room in the political sphere is closed to them because of its very high standards, blacks then lose those fundamental ties that connect them to the life processes of the nation. Their culture, simply as a performance aesthetic—which includes sports—remains the only space wherein they can cohabitate and within which they are admitted as “Cuban.”

The rapidity of this process, then, is of a cultural and political nature: the two basic pillars of all modern nations. Where are blacks headed, then, in the aftermath of the revolution? The way this debate is presently approached demonstrates that the question is difficult at best.

Those who defend “the fruit of the revolution” as it relates to race do so poorly. They base their discussion on whether or not blacks have benefited socially, which ushers further interminable discussion since the social satisfaction of those who are marginalized within poor or impoverished societies is never ending. Statistically, one can demonstrate both social satisfaction and dissatisfaction among blacks in Cuba, although the scale will always tip towards the latter on a comparative scale with whites. Those who attack said work of the revolution somehow lose their perspective because they focus on negative statistics that can easily demonstrate that blacks, in the long term, lose socially.

What I believe is more basic in the study of racial issues in post-revolutionary Cuba is the place of blacks within the nation, more than just in terms of their economic position, important as it may be. In this sense, the debate is almost nonexistent, at least within Cuba.

### *How do I see the matter?*

To be considered as integrated into a nation one can look at four interrelated ele-

ments: participation in political power—without political power a nation is just a nationality—, the relationship with the economic power structure, the ability to socially and culturally impact a society, and the aesthetic expression that identifies that nation in relation to others.

With the notable and curious exception of the last of the aforementioned elements, the other issues are not discussed in Cuba. In the first instance, everyone knows that political power in Cuba is not “colored” by the adequate participation of blacks. This is scandalous in a country where we are not a minority, and it is a reflection of how difficult the political elite finds it to admit to the diversity of our country. In the second instance, regarding the relationship with the economy, the matter doesn’t appear to have been solved yet. It’s a well known fact that there were practically no black peasants in Cuba. The black business owners concentrated in the urban centers of the country have been disappearing with time, and one can count on one’s fingers those who participate in Cuban-style small ownership or in the greater economic interests forged within the political elite.

The third instance, the ability to structurally impact the social and cultural fabric of a society is essential: it means a place from which to construct the moral, social, intellectual and cultural references that define national identity. On this issue, whites do not share power with blacks on any of the defining places. Blacks do affect cultural references—fortunately culture is malleable—but from a position of resistance to the system, from the new ‘slave quarters’ that pop-up everywhere and from that magical resolve to which many Cubans resort due to our typical pragmatism: our daily problems must be resolved by any means, whether by superstitiously placing a cup under the bed or a coconut in the first corner of the home.



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The decision of who enters and exits in greater society is not, conservatively speaking, in the hands of half of the population. Who decides, for example, that blacks may or may not come together to discuss their perspectives on their problems? Who defines the nature of these problems and the parameters of the discussion, if said discussion can take place at all? Who has the right to fear whom in Cuba?

All of this is essential because in the long run it allows for the likelihood that racism becomes more and more pervasive inside Cuba. And, just the discussion of this matter of belonging will make it possible for us to place these issues in what I believe to be the proper perspective: that of our place in the national framework, to find out whether or not we are or can be Cuban, beyond the emancipatory rhetoric that does little to draw us out of our social safe havens and the perfunctory exhibitions, or performances, when the power struc-

ture finds it convenient to show a particular identity to the outside world.

From this perspective it will be easier to understand that the only solution to this quandry is cultural: the full integration of our roots with all its cultural consequences, the first of which has to do with the intrinsic tolerance that flows from the magical world of our culture.

What I am saying is that blacks will have definitively entered the Cuban national psyche and identity only when they rest solidly upon the main contribution blacks make to them: tolerance for its many universal divinities, whether this is expressed through Marxism, Catholicism, Christianity or revolutionarily. As long as this process does not exist, Cuba will not be a whole nation, nor will blacks be entirely integrated within it. Only this will guarantee their participation in the remaining structuring elements that comprise a nation.