

# Reflections on Racism: a Black European's View

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In the 3rd issue of *Islas*, the publishers asked the question: Does racism exist in Cuba? This concern, and indeed the existence of *Islas* itself, reflects a long-standing relationship between the black populations of the U.S. and Cuba. In his essay, "The African-American Press and United States Involvement in Cuba, 1902-1912," in *Between Race and Empire* (1995), David Hellwig notes that except for Haiti, no other New World society has received as much attention in the nineteenth century from African Americans as Cuba. This excellent collection of essays by Cuban and African American authors mentions that Frederick Douglass called for U.S. Blacks to volunteer for Cuba's war against Spain, in 1895, and that Negro American newspapers supported the Afro-Cuban struggle. It also looks at sporting and cultural links between black Americans and Cubans, noting that the name of the first African American baseball team in 1885 was the "Cuban Giants."<sup>1</sup>

The publishers of *Islas* also noted that some African Americans might be surprised to hear of problems with race relations in Cuba. This is because in many cases they regard the Cuban racial situation as being better than in their own country. By law, if not always in practice, Afro-Cubans have enjoyed full citizenship rights for much longer than their U.S. counterparts. In 1902, the Constitution of the Cuban Republic conferred universal male suffrage. In the United States, by contrast, until quite recently in some Southern states, African Americans were effectively barred from voting.<sup>2</sup> It was only in 1965, after the Civil Rights movement fought to force a number of states to change their laws, that the Voting Rights Acts were passed.

Yet it is also the case that at times, racial tensions in Cuba generated levels of black mobilization not found elsewhere in Latin America. In 1908, the first black political party in the western hemisphere was formed.<sup>3</sup> The Partido Independiente de

Color (PIC) was founded to promote Afro-Cuban integration and to end discrimination. However, in February 1910, the PIC was declared illegal after an Afro-Cuban Senator, Martín Morúa Delgado, presented an amendment to the electoral law proscribing the formation of racially exclusive political parties. Severe racial repression followed the armed protest to re-legalize the PIC in 1912.

From then on, Afro-Cuban attempts at separatist organization were discouraged. Nevertheless, it is also true that few Afro-Cubans favoured this as a strategy for achieving equality. When Marcus Garvey visited the country in 1921 to promote his UNIA (Universal Negro Improvement Association), most of the Afro-Cuban press denounced his race-based appeals.<sup>4</sup> Though, by 1926, Cuba was the second largest country after the USA for UNIA activity, English-speaking migrant labourers from other Caribbean islands formed a significant part of the membership. In 1928, the UNIA was banned under the Morúa Law.<sup>5</sup> Du Bois's NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People) which, unlike Garvey's movement, included Whites, was seen as a more appropriate model for Afro-Cubans. In general, black Cubans campaigning for social justice recalled the view of José Martí that Cuban is more than white, more than mulatto, more than black and of the Afro-Cuban general Antonio Maceo who believed that one should ask nothing as a Black but for everything as a Cuban. Nicolás Guillén, who was hailed as the national poet after the Revolution, wrote an article entitled "El camino de Harlem" [The way of Harlem] which criticised U.S. black separatism. Many feared the imposition of U.S.-style segregation along with the North American economic and cultural domination of the island (*Diario de la Marina*, 5 mayo 1929, [n.p.]). With the rise of the Cuban labour movement from the 1920s, the political options of Afro-

Cubans were extended. The Communist Party, founded in 1925, actively recruited black members and gave them positions of leadership. However, organisation was increasingly along class rather than racial lines.

Afro-Cubans who fought to improve the situation of black people in their own country sometimes drew on aspects of their own experience of the U.S. For example, Evaristo Estenez, one of the founders of the Partido Independiente de Color, visited the United States and became interested in the situation of black Americans. Rafael Serra was the head of La Liga, a society for black Cubans and Puerto Ricans based in New York. He was also José Martí's secretary. On his return to Havana he became a politician and journalist and founded *El Nuevo Criollo*, an Afro-Cuban newspaper. He advocated that Afro-Cubans emulate their U.S. counterparts in accumulating capital and also in the use of the Afro-Cuban press to challenge stereotypes.<sup>6</sup> Thus Afro-Cubans attempted to emulate some aspects of the African American experience, while rejecting others.

After the 1959 revolution, the relationship between African Americans and Cubans continued. But this time it was the (predominantly white) revolutionary leadership that made a point of supporting black movements outside Cuba. In 1963, when Fidel Castro visited New York for a meeting of the United Nations, he moved to the Hotel Theresa in Harlem in protest of the treatment he and his delegation received at another Manhattan hotel. In 1968, Castro pledged support for Stokely Carmichael and the Black Power Movement. The island also received a number of U.S. black, nationalist visitors including Eldridge Cleaver, John Clytus and Angela Davis. The former Black Panther activist Assata Shakur has been living in Cuba since 1984. Shakur spent six and a half years in a US jail for allegedly killing a police officer, a crime she denies

having committed. She escaped from jail and left the U.S., as she puts it: “fleeing political repression and the racism and violence that dominate the U.S. government’s policy towards people of color.”<sup>77</sup>

Some African American visitors, such as Clytus and Cleaver, subsequently produced negative reports of their Cuban experience, however. They felt that, by denouncing as counterrevolutionary any Afro-Cuban attempts to identify as black and assume an ethnic identity over a national one, the Communists were following the age-old strategy of attempting to erase the black problem by erasing the black race. Yet there is no doubt that, in the early days, the Revolution had the support of the majority of the population and especially of the Afro-Cuban population.<sup>8</sup> The Revolution included the elimination of the bases of institutional racism among its expressed aims and attempted to challenge racism as an ideology. From the mid-1960s to the late 1980s, Cubans also provided military and civilian aid, including teachers, doctors and construction experts, to a number of African countries. The leadership stated that this represented atonement for slavery and recognition of Cuba’s historical debt to Africa. On two notable occasions, Cubans helped to defeat South African troops that were invading Angola. Students from a number of African countries received their education in Cuba. In fact, the island has hosted more foreign students per capita than any other country in the world. Despite the economic difficulties, Cuba is currently offering a free medical education to low-income minority students from the United States since 2000. This program arose out of meetings between the Congressional Black Caucus and Fidel Castro.

An assessment of the extent to which the Revolution has been successful in addressing disadvantage among the Afro-Cuban population has been hindered by the lack of statistics on race. In fact, it is only

since 1993 that research into racial discrimination has been officially sanctioned. The alleged color-blindness on the part of officialdom has limited the monitoring of equal opportunities. But many Afro-Cubans from poorer backgrounds were able to benefit from the free education that their counterparts would not have received in other societies. Even so, while there was more access to higher education and an increase in social mobility for Afro-Cubans after 1959, they remain underrepresented in certain areas, including the higher echelons of the leadership. Racial stereotypes are extremely persistent. Nowadays, because of the emigration patterns, Afro-Cubans are also less likely than white Cubans to have relatives in exile sending remittances. This explains why they appear to be over-represented in street crime and black market activities. As elsewhere in the world, police are also more likely to stop young blacks on suspicion of criminal activity.

Previous issues of *Islas* have published articles discussing how racial identities and their social implications are perceived differently in Cuba and the United States. For example, visitors to Cuba sometimes claim that Cubans cannot be racist as they generally appear more relaxed about racial mixing and are more at ease in the company of other races. As the publishers of *Islas* point out, many white Cubans uphold this view (June 2006, p. 3). In Latin American societies there is generally an inclusive definition of nationality. This claims that racial background or racial differences are irrelevant (though this is clearly not the case). In the United States race is a central issue. Also, as writer Toni Morrison observes: “American means white, and Africanist people struggle to make the term applicable to themselves with ethnicity and hyphen after hyphen after hyphen” (*Playing in the dark* 47).

Another difference is that in Cuba, the national identity is declared to be mixed.

By contrast, in the English-speaking world, the acknowledgement of racial mixture is not part of the national ideology. The story of one of the fathers of the U.S. nation, Thomas Jefferson, seems to illustrate the national myth. It was rumoured that he had a relationship with his slave Sally Hemings, the mixed-race half-sister of his deceased wife. Attempts to deny the true nature of the relationship over the centuries became more difficult to sustain after the DNA testing of Hemings' descendants in 1998. A country in denial is condemned to repeat the same mistakes. In recent years, the Southern U.S. Senator Strom Thurmond, while publicly supporting racial segregation and opposing civil rights for African Americans, hid the fact that his private desires had produced a mixed-race daughter by the family's teenage housekeeper, Carrie Butler. In the U.S., interracial relationships have enough taboos on both sides to make them a troublesome option for most. The social discomfort was detailed in Spike Lee's 1991 film, *Jungle Fever*. Britain, on the other hand, has one of the fastest-growing mixed race populations in the world. A 1997 study found that half of the black men and one third of the black women in Britain who were in relationships had a white partner.

Despite the fact they are constructs, national myths and ideas about race and racial identity have an impact on national discussions around racism. More importantly, perhaps, they can affect how struggles to challenge racism are conducted. For example, in recent years Britain has come to be defined as a multicultural society. Yet as the writer Kenan Malik points out in his essay "Against Multiculturalism," this means that cultural attachments become more important than political capacity. He states: "the quest for equality has increasingly been abandoned in favour of the claim to a diverse society."<sup>9</sup> The celebration of difference, respect for pluralism, and the avowal of identity politics are regarded as

the hallmarks of a progressive, antiracist outlook. Unfortunately, instead of believing in the possibility of social transformation, this means that people accept society as it is. It is true that in Britain the antiracism movement, which united different ethnic minority communities, seems to have become fragmented. This is not good news as the British government is currently exacerbating virulent institutional racism. Today, black people in the UK are more economically excluded than they were 30 years ago: British Africans and Caribbeans are around three times as likely to be unemployed as white people.<sup>10</sup>

The publishers of *Islas* suggest that in Cuba, black people "are not free to discuss race without fear of reprisal or being ostracized" (June 2006, p.3). In Britain, we have been discussing and protesting against racism for decades. Unfortunately, this does not guarantee that we are listened to or taken seriously. Instead we have to resort to desperate measures to bring our grievances to the attention of the wider society. The 1981 riots in Brixton, South London were caused by what the subsequent investigation called the "racial disadvantage that is a fact of British life." The report by Lord Scarman (1982) into the causes of the riots criticised police and the government, and led to the introduction of many measures to improve trust and understanding between the police and ethnic minority communities.<sup>11</sup> But racial tensions—particularly with the police—led to further riots in 1985 in Brixton after an officer accidentally shot and wounded a black woman during a police raid, and again, ten years later, when a young black man died in police custody.

As in Mississippi, U.S.A., where in the 1960s white men claimed not to know it was against the law to kill a black man, racist murders go unpunished in Britain today. A black teenager, Stephen Lawrence, was murdered by white youths thirteen years ago. The Institute of Race Relations

estimates that in Britain there has been an average of five racist murders a year since 1993, when Stephen Lawrence was killed. In 2005, another black teenager, Anthony Walker, was murdered in Liverpool by white youths who embedded an axe in his skull. Both he and Lawrence were highly motivated secondary school students who would have had a promising future. The murderers of Stephen Lawrence still walk the streets freely and never went to jail for their crime, despite the efforts of his parents and community organizations to obtain justice. In 1999, Sir William Macpherson's inquiry into the handling of the Stephen Lawrence murder said the Metropolitan Police still suffered from 'institutional racism.' The Macpherson report, which was supposed to be a watershed for race relations in the U.K., forced an official acknowledgment that the institutional pillars of the British state were infected with systematically racist attitudes and practices.

While it took some tentative steps towards tackling institutional racism following the report, the government has turned full circle. The government's asylum and citizenship policies have resulted in an upsurge in racially motivated violence and police harassment. The notion that a country is being 'swamped' or submerged by a refugee 'tidal wave' means that ethnic minority populations within European nations are becoming targets of national paranoia. In January, 2003, at a time when political assault on asylum seekers was at its height, instead of providing a political lead against the race hate being spread in the tabloid newspapers, the government responded by launching a state clampdown on the rights of refugees. When the major piece of post-Macpherson legislation, the Race Relations Act 2000, an amendment extending 1976 legislation, was passed, immigration officers were exempt from it and were to be allowed to discriminate

against 'undesirable aliens' identified by the Home Office.

The curtailment of civil liberties employed in the 'war on terror' disproportionately affects members of ethnic minorities. Muslims and those who are perceived to look like Muslims are the principal targets of a new racism. In July 2004, figures released by the Home Office showed a 300 per cent rise in the number of Asians stopped and searched under anti-terrorism legislation.<sup>12</sup> This was despite the fact that the 609 arrests made under the Terrorist Act 2000 led to the conviction of just three Muslims. Racist attacks on asylum seekers and on British Asians are also rising sharply. The Crown Prosecution Service recently reported a 20 per cent surge in racially motivated attacks.

Another European country where members of ethnic minorities have to take to the streets to protest at ongoing injustice in France. This has a different model from multicultural Britain. There, as in its former colonies, the assimilation of non-French populations is the expressed goal. Yet France has failed notably to offer members of ethnic minorities the same rights as other citizens. Last year the country saw the worst riots since the revolt of May 1968. These erupted as an expression of rage against police treatment, unemployment and perceived racism and discrimination in French society.<sup>13</sup>

Many of France's ethnic minorities live in what are called *les cités*. These are 'ghettos' that were specially built for migrants from France's former North African colonies and other parts of the world and tend to be situated on the edges of France's big cities. Thus, the children of the immigrants who built France after World War II are being pushed further outside French society.

Those who rose up last year are French citizens. They were born into first and second generation immigrant communities from France's former colonies. They are not

motivated by religion, and the protest has nothing to do with Islam and the Western cliché of 'Islamic fundamentalism.' It is a protest against oppression and racism. This is the only way the youth can express their anger and frustration at a French political establishment that refuses to allow immigrants, in their diversity, to be integrated. Youth unemployment in the ghettos is three times higher than the national average or more than 40 percent. Furthermore, French of Muslim and North African origins constitute the largest percentage of France's prison population. Sociologists put the blame on marginalization, towering poverty and unemployment rates among the Muslim-Arab minority. The situation is not unique to France; it is a trend across Western Europe.

The youth are excluded from mainstream French society and subjected to police harassment, which is encouraged by racist policies. In its annual report, in April 2005, Amnesty International criticised the 'impunity' granted to police and the violent treatment of youth of North African origin during identity checks. Like its British counterpart, the French government is instrumental in promoting racism and xenophobia. The French interior minister at the time, Nicolas Sarkozy, allegedly referred to the rioting youth as "subhuman," "louts" and "scum."<sup>14</sup> Such statements increase the feelings of alienation expressed by the riots. Mr Sarkozy, who was running for president in 2007 (and won), enjoys the support of 57% of French voters. A French government-commissioned report to the interior ministry presented by Jean-Christophe Rufin, former vice-president of *Médecins sans Frontières*, in October 2004, revealed that mounting racism and "anti-Semitism" in France represents "a radical threat to the survival of our democratic system."

While in the past, some African Americans saw the racial situation in Cuba as better than their own, black Europeans

like me, in the 1970s and 1980s, looked to the United States. The powerful reach of the U.S. media and Hollywood, and the fact that we speak more or less the same language, explain why this was so. We watched *Roots*, *The Cosby Show*, etc, and saw images of African Americans in the media at a time when we only had a few stereotypes on British television. If you travelled to the U.S., you could find a whole range of publications aimed at African Americans and hundreds of products for black hair and skin. It seemed that Black power had become a reality there and this showed us what we could also hopefully achieve. Yet, on becoming a frequent visitor to the U.S., I gradually realised that along with the cosmetics we were being sold a cosmetic image that concealed a less attractive reality.

While I was at the University of Texas at Austin doing research in 1996, I learned that the main library was named Perry-Castañeda after the first African American and Hispanic students to be admitted to the University. I was very surprised to discover that this had only happened in 1975, after I had begun my own university studies in Europe. My next port of call was the University of Miami. There I met two Haitian-American students who were among the few black faces at the law school that they told me had only begun to admit black students as recently as the mid-1980s. In 2000, I was at a conference in Nashville, Tennessee. A white Virginian friend of mine told me that laws against interracial marriage had only just been repealed in some Southern states. I did not believe him at first but when I checked on the Internet I discovered that interracial marriage was technically illegal in South Carolina until 1998 and in Alabama, until 2000, later even than in South Africa!

I mention these facts to point out that even following the Civil Rights struggle, until quite recently, if you were African American, depending on where you lived, your condition was not much different from

that of a black person living under the apartheid regime in South Africa. Why did we, in Europe, never consider boycotting the United States when we were boycotting apartheid South Africa? Democracy does not automatically guarantee equality or inclusion. In fact, thousands of African Americans in Florida were disenfranchised as recently as during the 2000 presidential elections.

Yet, the U.S. Civil Rights movement and the examples of black American achievement remain an inspiration to people of color everywhere. Today, there are African Americans who hold high ranking positions in government, business, education and many other spheres —undoubtedly more than in Britain today. It will be a long time before we have the equivalent of a Colin Powell or Condoleezza Rice in Europe. As Professor Henry Louis Gates observed on his TV program, *America Beyond the Color Line*, broadcast in the U.S. in February 2004,: “the rise of the black middle class has led people to say we’re not racist.” Yet he also notes that in Chicago one in five black men are in prison, on probation or parole, and that 45% of black men between the ages of 20 and 24 are unemployed. In the years since 1968, when Martin Luther King, Jr. was murdered, the black underclass has remained unchanged. Individual successes have been accompanied by collective setbacks. Although legal barriers to black participation have been removed, economic, social and political barriers remain firmly in place. In the United States racial disparities in health, education, and poverty persist.

There seems to be consensus today that each community should be ‘separate but equal.’ The promise held out by the American dream being, of course, that there is equality of opportunity. The reality shows otherwise. As the floods in New Orleans starkly revealed, inherited privileges based on skin colour remain firmly in place. This means life chances, including

the chance to remain alive and be healthy. The majority of African Americans live in segregated housing projects, saturated with drugs and guns, and where a kind of fatalism prevails. Many sign up to fight America’s wars abroad as it is the only way they can get access to education, training and healthcare, something that is available to all Cuban citizens, despite the shortages of recent years.

When she died, Rosa Parks was the first woman to be accorded the honor of being interred at the U.S. Capitol Rotunda, a tribute usually reserved for presidents, outstanding soldiers and politicians. Yet this national heroine spent her final years living in poverty, dependent on the kindness of her landlord who offered her a home rent-free, something only provided by her government after she died.

Martin Luther King Jr.’s inspirational *I Have a Dream* speech, delivered in 1963, noted that 100 years after the Emancipation Proclamation that granted slaves their freedom, the Negro was “still sadly crippled by the manacles of segregation and the chains of discrimination... and still lives on a lonely island of poverty in the midst of a vast ocean of material prosperity... and finds himself an exile in his own land.”<sup>15</sup> Sadly, despite the many positive changes, this statement still rings true.

Returning to the case of Cuba, even the Cuban government acknowledges that overt manifestations of racism have become more common on the island in recent years. This is described as a consequence of the growing inequality in that society. Let us also not forget that one reason behind the sustained economic crisis in Cuba is the ongoing U.S. trade embargo, something that is not applied to other socialist regimes. It is my opinion that its removal would be an important step in improving the lot of our brothers and sisters in Cuba. African Americans and Afro-Cubans joined forces in the past to fight racism and impe-

rialism. It is important to be aware that people of color in different countries are often oppressed by the same forces.

Whatever the future may hold for the mass of Afro-Cubans, we should not forget the example of Eastern Europe, where there has been a rise in racism and anti-semitism since 1989, when the socialist regimes were dismantled. Today, many Afro-Cubans rightly fear that what ground they have gained since 1959 could be lost following the return of the predominantly white Cuban exiles from the United States.

I would like to conclude by quoting Martin Luther King, Jr., an outstanding African American who has inspired us all. He said: "Let us not wallow in the valley of despair" and also: "Our lives begin to end the day we become silent about things that

matter." An examination of Cuban history shows that over the centuries Afro-Cubans have fought to end slavery, to gain the country's independence from Spain and to campaign for equal rights. Many also fought in support of a revolution that promised to end racism. When other avenues are closed, Afro-Cubans have always turned to the practice of Afro-Cuban religions such as santería as a means of collective affirmation and resistance to the prevailing ideology. We in Europe, the United States and elsewhere are also seeking social justice within our respective societies, using whatever means available to achieve this. Like Afro-Cubans in the past, we must decide which examples to emulate and which we should reject.



## Notes and Bibliography

- 1- Apparently they called themselves “Cuban” to hide the fact that they were black and spoke gibberish to each other during the game so that fans would think they were speaking Spanish. See [http://library.thinkquest.org/J0112883/Teams/cuban\\_giants.htm](http://library.thinkquest.org/J0112883/Teams/cuban_giants.htm).
- 2- For a thorough comparative analysis of the black struggle for equality in the U.S. and Cuba, see Lisa Brock and Digna Castañeda Fuertes’s *Between Race and Empire: African-Americans and Cubans before the Cuban Revolution* (1998).
- 3- See Aline Helg, *Our Rightful Share: the Afro-Cuban struggle for equality, 1886-1912*. (1995). The PIC preceded the Frente Negra Brasileira, which was set up in São Paulo, Brazil, in 1931.
- 4- See Lee Lockwood, *Conversations with Eldridge Cleaver* (1970): 17, and John Clytus, *Black man, red Cuba* (1970): 97, 127.
- 5- See Tomás Fernández Robaina’s “Marcus Garvey in Cuba: Urrutia, Cubans and Black Nationalism.” In *Between Race and Empire* (1998): 120-28, and Rupert Lewis’s *Garvey: His Work and Impact* (1988).
- 6- On the many Afro-Cuban newspapers and journals published in the 19th century, see Pedro Deschamps Chapeaux, *El negro en el periodismo cubano en el siglo XIX* (1963).
- 7- See the Assata Shakur website, <http://www.assatahakur.org/>.
- 8- Zeitlin conducted a survey in 1962 in which 80% of black Cubans and 67% of white Cubans confirmed their support for the Revolution. See Maurice Zeitlin’s *Revolutionary Politics and the Cuban Working Class* (1967): 7.
- 9- For the complete essay, go to [http://www.kenanmalik.com/essays/against\\_me.html](http://www.kenanmalik.com/essays/against_me.html).
- 10- To read Jonny Burnett and Dave Whyte’s complete essay “New Labour’s new racism,” in *Red Pepper* October 2004, go to <http://www.irr.org.uk/2004/october/ak000008.html>.
- 11- For information about the Lord Scarman report, “Scarman Inquiry in to the Brixton Riots,” go to [http://www.aim25.ac.uk/cgi-bin/search2?coll\\_id=2093&inst\\_id=14](http://www.aim25.ac.uk/cgi-bin/search2?coll_id=2093&inst_id=14).
- 12- In Britain, “Asian” is the term for a person with origins in the Indian subcontinent.
- 13- To read about this in James Button’s article “Sarkozy under fire as violence spreads” (7 November 2005), go to [www.theage.com.au/news/world/sarkozy-under-fire-as-violence-spreads/2005/11/06/1131211945874.html](http://www.theage.com.au/news/world/sarkozy-under-fire-as-violence-spreads/2005/11/06/1131211945874.html).
- 14- To read Ghali Hassan’s article “French ghettos, police violence and racism” in *Global Research* 8 (November 2005), go to <http://www.globalresearch.ca/index.php?context=viewArticle&code=HAS20051108&articleId=1214>.
- 15- Martin Luther King, Jr. “I Have a Dream,” delivered at the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C. on August 28, 1963. Go to <http://www.extension.umn.edu/units/diversity/mlk/mlk.htm>.

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