

The Race Problem in Cuba: A Silent Worry

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The (complex, profound and ancestral) problem of race in Cuba has for a long time been the cause of growing concern for many black and mestizo intellectuals who in private, intimate spaces endlessly discuss their critical perceptions, worries, experiences, frustrations, and hopes regarding a reality that in one way or another affects all Cubans and seriously compromises the future of the nation.

Even if it is true that in Cuba there are no obvious or general interracial contradictions and confrontations, nor institutionalized racial discrimination, the racial problem that concerns us is getting much worse and more dangerous because it threatens to create fissures and an imbalance too great for a country doomed to transcendental changes. This can be attributed to the internal, structural complexity of a society that is as closed as that of Cuba.

One does not have to be too observant to realize that after several decades of celebrated nominal equality, the socioeconomic turns and restructuring that have occurred in Cuba make the island's black and mestizo population the primary loser. It is always behind and

set back in terms of its access to prominent political and economic positions, as well as in its symbolic and media representation.

It is quite understandable that in many countries of Central and South America black minorities are visible only in sports and in the news, as subjects of the most serious problems and social inequities. Yet, after almost fifty years of a system like the Cuban one, which supposedly was designed to establish and guarantee full equality and justice, the near displacement of the black and mestizo population from the political, military and business hierarchy, its near absence from national television and film, and its overrepresentation in the prison population clearly demonstrate setbacks and privations. Indeed, these are deserving of worry, attention, and action on the part of those politicians who are responsible, as well as from those intellectuals capable of acknowledging, evaluating, and influencing the problem.

In light of the growing gravity of the problem, in recent years there has been an increase in the number of isolated demonstrations, closed-door discussions and even mentions of the subject in official publications,



even if these rarely deal directly with the issue or its causes. They also do not promote a very necessary debate that could openly, transparently and unprejudiciously deal with the topic just to explore responsible ways to challenge a reality that is even starting to concern the authorities, who are, nonetheless, still far from accepting that it is not through authoritative silence or imposed manipulations that they can best confront so sensitive and transcendental an issue.

Cuban blacks and mestizos with intellectual capacity, political baggage, social presentability, or prestige, and who feel victimized (in their personal and social interests and relationships, and in their deepest sensibilities) by those problems of recognition and access that are totally unrelated to the authorities' traditional emancipatory rhetoric, have never shown themselves as being disposed to

join with coherent movements designed to confront in a political or civic manner the causes and manifestations of their worries.

Only famed veteran actress Elvira Cervera has openly, publicly, and transparently spoken in favor of getting involved in the issue—from all levels of society—in order to find formulae that will permit the elimination of the evermore evident gap between the demographic reality and the symbolic, institutional, and media representation of blacks and mestizos in Cuba. With aplomb and awe, the adorable octogenarian actress asserts that in her experience it has been precisely the black and mestizo intellectuals who have most shunned or rejected their call to get beyond a state of permanent worry and take up real activism to confront a problem of unforeseeable importance.

People from different official angles or positions who do supposedly get involved in the issue seem to be more concerned about pleasing the authorities, about not appearing hypercritical or discordant and, above all, about protecting their particular interests. For these ladies and gentlemen, the United States—and not Africa or the Caribbean—is the primary foreign scene of their activities and dealings. There they appear liberal, eager and as lovers of debates and diversity. They have become a manipulative and conservative elite with little ability for progress and mobility in the vindicating effort, the civic and cultural search that should be its focus.

On the other hand, we have seen various well-known African-American personalities move about within the context of these official and closed circles. Their approach to Cuban reality lacks the very same essentials that nourish the ideals and struggles of minority groups in the U.S. Theirs is a truly romanticized and distorted view of socio-political relations in Cuba, which is virtually inexplica-

ble, as an African-American professor once told me a few years back, because in Cuba one has only to notice the large number of blacks on the street and the few in any cabinet positions to know that something is afool.

Famous actor Danny Glover is an illustrative example. He seems to have chosen an inappropriate place through which to channel his respectable disagreement with a sector of the political class of his own country. In his encounters with impenetrable audiences of well chosen interlocutors, he has unwittingly advanced the proposals of various projects that had remained only at the stage of intentions, as if someone actually believed or feared that the reach and importance of these initiatives could contribute to undoing the downward spiral of uncontainable and undesired manifestations much beyond the closed circle of a chosen few.

Any possible definition or solutions to Cuba's ancestral and complex racial problems will remain deeply affected as long as the government refuses to recognize its failure in this delicate, profoundly important social issue, or open up spaces for very necessary debates and unrestricted or controlled participation in them. It is obvious, on the other hand, that the vast majority of black and mestizo intellectuals have not managed to prioritize their social chimeras and responsibilities above their fears and interests. The situation is worse yet, because alternative political groups have not dared admit that the race problem is a cultural, social, human, and political problem that they should deal with in their political programs and plans.

Two projects free of government influence, whose intention it is to thoroughly deal with the problem and with racial integration in the country, have been created: one is the *Cofradía de la Negritud* [the Brotherhood of Blackness], made up of non-partisan intellec-

tuals and workers who in recent years have developed a predominantly civic project, a laudable effort to affirm the cultural and social values of the black and mestizo population. This effort is seriously impacted by the lack of spaces and resources that challenge truly independent initiatives in Cuba.

The other is the *Movimiento de Integración Racial Juan Gualberto Gómez* (MIR) [the Juan Gualberto Gómez Movement for Racial Integration], made up of people who more or less participate in peaceful opposition and human rights movements. The MIR has been developing a much more confrontational dynamic but is limited in its reach because of its minimal intellectual soundness and its structural and programmatic weakness.

Only a recognized political project whose trajectory has deeply analytically and programmatically probed the issue of integration and the rights of this particular segment of the population will truly work for Cubans of African ancestry. Such a project needs to take into account this group's contribution to the nation's cultural framework and its particular definitions of history and politics. This particular perception differs extremely from that of the current government, as well as its own concept of the spaces and power to which black and mestizo Cubans should be fully entitled.

La Corriente Socialista Democrática Cubana (CSDC) [the Cuban Socialist Democratic Current] has a separate section titled "El problema negro" [the black problem] in its "General Political Program": it appears in the *Cuadernos del Socialismo Democrático de 2002* [the 2002 Social Democratic Notebooks]:

"The black problem in Cuba is a complex phenomenon that through centuries has been

an inherent part of our lack of historical definition and cultural disencounters. It can be defined as the historical struggle of this sector of the population against subordination, injustices and inequalities. Its goal is to reach a full sense of national belonging, identity and destiny. Important problems such as our nation's real configuration depend on this problem's definitive solution.

Historical transculturation—essentially between Europeans and blacks—was a long and painful process during which the latter of the two groups was practically discarded because of its experience as slaves and its outward color. This reality became an obstacle to the creation of a unique sense of belonging, identity and destiny because the essential sense of belonging to the human race was subordinated according to the color of one's skin. Also, this made it impossible for blacks to achieve property and cultural ownership, both conditions that are basic to equal social participation, and served as the basis upon which the dominant elite transformed its irrational ideas into racial prejudice and racist ideology.

Blacks themselves from different economic strata and of different skin tones, initiated their own process of identity construction. This was observable in palenques [independent, runaway slave communities] and uprisings from the sixteenth century to the first half of the nineteenth century. Later on, in the midst of the independence wars of the second half of the nineteenth century, a tighter, solidarious relationship between whites and blacks brought forth the first vestiges of a black-white national identity.

Yet, once slavery was abolished, blacks who fought in the war and became heroes went home to be exactly what they had been before—just blacks. There continued to be no solution to the agenda of social equality and justice for which they fought. Blacks were not

represented in any of the traditional political parties. Attempts to create independent parties ended in a massacre, and black organizations, which mirrored the cultural underpinnings of their white counterparts, began to discriminate against their own if they were of a lower economic and cultural status. It is true that they later achieved some measure of success via victories in union struggles and leftist parties, all of which was subsequently represented in the 1940 Constitution and even later legislation.

The Revolution of 1959 struck the greatest blow in the history of Cuba against racism, via institutional and educational measures that opened doors to formerly forbidden spaces—e.g., certain jobs and schooling, which improved conditions for many Cuban blacks. Yet, the benefits gained came with a price because they also lost certain irreplaceable and instrumental privileges such as the ability to create special interest groups, a free press and access to public debate, which put them back at their worse position in history. They were left totally unprepared for socialism's real crisis in 1989; left them defenseless against the growing resurgence of racist behavior and a worsening of their living conditions. It also virtually excluded them from receiving family remittances—since their families did not leave Cuba. All this was reflected in the massive presence of blacks in the events of August 1944.

The Cuban colony had no interest in solving the black problem; the Cuban Republic acknowledged the problem and allowed the creation of civic groups and public debate without offering institutional measures [to support them]. The Revolution implemented educational and institutional measures, but dismantled civil society and its concomitant rights. In summary, the black problem suffered because it was not dealt with directly and fully,

which a highly complex issue such as this requires.

In taking into account that the black problem requires a response to a historically unsatisfied claim, that its solution will also address other national problems, and that it needs to be dealt with in its entirety and with a view to its causes and prejudices, the CSCD proposes the following measures:

- the promotion of an open and public debate about the black issue—a problem that was taken for resolved and has purposefully been kept quiet for much too long—and encouragement of a deep analysis of its causes and corresponding ways in which to fight it;
- the end and legal penalization of the current representation of blacks in the media and any form of discrimination to which they are subjected;
- a prioritized reform of this sector's right to own property;
- prioritized access to information and a means by which this sector can improve its level of education and culture;
- the design and development of a long-term general education program for the entire population, with a view to ending inequities in education and property ownership between blacks and whites;
- the creation of spaces and the legalization of the right of association of black Cuban men and women, in order to support efforts focused on the elimination of the causes of the current situation and discrimination; a favoring of a program of racial integration that is independent of the State, in order to be able to participate equitably in the job market.

The results of all these efforts should be quantifiable so that those who benefit from them can feel a part of and actors in a project of social justice—until the image of subordination disappears from reality and the minds of the beneficiaries, and it is replaced by a

sense of universally belonging to a common identity and having a common destiny.”

This project, and other declarations and publications of the CSCD, and the coalition to which it belongs—the Arco Progresista, makes it clear that as far as the institutionalized Democratic left in Cuba is concerned there can be no possible reconstruction of a new and modern, fully integrated nation that guarantees social peace if we do not face the challenge of making the delicate demographic balance of different racial groups within the Cuban national identity count for something with regard to rights, status, and representation.

The Cuban Revolution's 'original sin' was to undermine the positive achievements of the first half of the twentieth century in order to automatically implant equality by decree. This brought about the concomitant suppression of debate and of the right of association (and space in which to do so) for Cuban African descendants. The first step in dealing with the current race problem is to recover these civic spaces, an independent voice and initiate a debate. This is the only possible way to find solutions that take into account just how long and hard this process may be. It will be a road plagued by historical, cultural and subjective obstacles.

In light of this complex reality, purposeful or intentional silence, insensitivity, and stagnation might constitute a definitive and irreversible sin because black and mestizo Cuban intellectuals are entirely responsible for what happens and we have very little time in which to face this challenge and come closer to achieving our desired objectives.