

The Sack Man

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The Revolution got rid of more than one horrible thing during my early years in Guanabacoa, but the Sack Man remained unscathed. The enigmatic image of this untrusting, anti-social and ragged black man, who with his walking stick and a sack full of God knows what terrifying things thrown over his shoulder was always both near and far, a constant presence in our nightmares, and made our pupils dilate and mouths dry. There was no more employed or efficient way than to merely mention him to get us to behave well and be obedient. We never asked ourselves why the Sack Man was black, why he inexorably had to be so. Not even black children asked themselves why: they were just as afraid of him as white children.

Later, much, much later, we would discover that the Sack Man was a not so clever but more daring tall story than the one about the Three Wise Men, and that the real threat, the quintessence of danger that we thought he embodied was the real reason for his invention: a fear of blacks (and anything

having to do with blacks). This is a stigma that forever and today has prevented the Cuban people from entering modernity, even since before we had a sense of ourselves, and an authentic national identity.

We would discover that this fear was the cause of our history's greatest tragedies, and of the most persistent poverty. Of course, we would end up discovering that this fear is not just a simple manifestation of discrimination, just one more of many, as we frequently seem to hear, and that just as solely a formal rejection of racial discrimination on its own is not helping us much in the cure of this spiritual epidemic, much less do we succeed in obviating the image of the Sack Man by simply revealing its mendacious origin.

If each discriminatory act speaks to the shortcomings and vices that have played a role in the formation of one's intellect and spiritual capacity: fear, which is not only a costly burden but also becomes a sort of aberration, is the product of some sort of maladjustment that, perhaps, might be interesting to brain biochemists. It apparently

seems to effect people's balance and leaves indelible impressions on their memories. Just as a discriminator stupidly believes himself to be superior to the object he rejects, a fearful discriminator cannot avoid, even if subconsciously, feeling a kind of tense dependency, an apprehension that in some measure puts him at a disadvantage and fuels within him hate of his victim of discrimination.

The Sack Man is still walking the streets and fields of Cuba these days: he may be known by other names now, perhaps a bit more current, but he is essentially the same and as equally omnipresent as in the worst of times. This is so despite the attitudinal change the country has seen (above all, in official discourse) over the past fifty years. Our effort to unite ourselves as Cubans, beyond all our socio-racial and other differences, has had no effect whatsoever on the elimination of said differences. Worse yet, they have not managed to eradicate or at least mitigate their most harmful and compromising effect: a fear of blacks.

In 1893, at the height of the overwhelming racial resentment and mistrust amongst Cubans, José Martí wrote: "There is no danger of war between the races in Cuba."¹ He was not exactly right, and must have been the first to know it. We must assume that this phrase was meant as one of those semantic weapons that leaders tend to use when making pronouncements about things that are in reality goals and not accomplishments.

There is probably sufficient proof to convince us of the fact that Martí was obsessed when it came to the details of the cause and scene he was defending. There is less, perhaps, to help us situate the nobility of his intentions and even his words in the aforementioned context. One need look no further for this than the very same text,



which goes on to affirm: "Everything that divides men, everything that specifies, separates or pens them, is a sin against humanity." In any event, the truth is that if Martí managed to convince the Island's patriots to put aside their mutual mistrust at that moment, so they could give priority to the struggle against Spanish domination (a wise move almost entirely possible only because of his semantics), this did not mean that they were not afraid of a race war between them.

It also doesn't mean that the Apostle succeeded in making much progress in allaying those fears. We know that racial discrimination between Cubans reached barbarous heights before, during, and even after the independence war. Fear of blacks, and particularly its mark on the psyche of whites,

and the logical scars this left on blacks, was and always has been like the classic barrel of gunpowder next to a fireplace.

Nevertheless, the basis for this fear has always been false and treacherous. There is not one single bit of serious and scientific evidence to show that black Cubans have ever considered seeking power or supremacy. Things are not as they were in the nineteenth or early twentieth century. One could say that fear of a race war has lost its ability to generate fear on the island. As a topic, though, it does elicit contradictory opinions from scholars and observers. The barrel is full of gunpowder and it is right next to the fireplace, but the fire itself is discreet and under control, at least to some degree.

In any event, racial discrimination—and its most compromising tendency—fear of blacks, persists and refuses to abandon its sordid dominion in spaces in which it established itself long ago, throughout centuries. How do official discourse and the authorities' attitude, which are against racism, dovetail with the active existence of discrimination among Cubans, one might ask? What has been the cause of so little progress after fifty years under an absolutist system of government that proclaimed itself the enemy of racial discrimination since its very first day in power? How can one understand that the revolutionary government's transcending reforms in the area of national education, with its enormous impact on the whole population has not had a positive effect on this socially regressive reality? What lesson can we learn from the history of a country that for fifty years has prioritized first and foremost all kinds of equality for human beings but nevertheless leaves intact in the people's psyche aberrations as enormously inhuman as a fear of blacks? If one can see and confirm the persistence of racist behavior as

something general and common, is it possible to assert that there is no danger of a war between the races in Cuba today without being totally absurd?

There are too many unanswered questions. To take up these arguments and the facts I would require answering them all in a detailed fashion goes way beyond the limits and purpose of this article. But it might help to realize that reading between the lines of each of the questions may make it easier for us to see essential revelations.

Restless doubt and questions

Since many pages have been penned on the subject, it is well known that a fear of blacks started in Cuba practically with the arrival of the first African slaves. The evil and unbridled ambition of the sugar producers and leading slave traders very quickly caused the number of Africans and African descendants to exceed that of European and Creole whites. This fact, and certain other events, like the slave rebellions in Haiti, and frequent attempts on the part of rebels and escaped slaves in our own country, exacerbated the terrified minds and souls of those who, while fully cognizant of their crimes, also "had leapt before they looked," as the old saying goes. Worse yet, that situation made it possible for the 'usual suspects' (politicians, magnates, bitter ideologues, etc.) to fan that fear for their own purposes.

Many scholars agree that brilliant Havana economist and politician Francisco Arango y Parreno (1765-1837) was the greatest propagator of this fear of blacks, both politically and sociologically. He specifically directed his efforts at manipulating the feelings and actions of Cuban whites, particularly rich whites. He may have been the most famous, the greatest manipulator of them

all, because of his brilliance and the substantial influence he exacted on his contemporaries in his own social class. But he was not the only one, nor the only clever one with so much power to control. The one thing this terrible spiritual illness, with its ability to grow stronger and preserve its punch, has not lacked, despite the passing of many years, and continued evidence of its nocivity, is its sharp, wily, smart, energetic, and influential proponents, who are always ready to put all their passion into its ascendance.

Even during the independence struggles, despite the heroism and unquestionable commitment shown by black Mambi soldiers, whose essential prowess as warriors was already famous, there were men among those in power who sowed seeds of suspicion and rejection against them. One example from among many is, perhaps, a good illustration of this: famous patriot Salvador Cisneros Betancourt (1828-1914), twice the President of the Republic at Arms, a wealthy and cultured bearer of a noble title—the Marquis of Santa Lucia.

It seemed that black Cubans were going to have a chance to gain access once colonial domination had ended, thanks to the blood they spilled on the battlefields of Cuba. If they had risked their lives in the countryside while inspired by Martí's words: "True men, black and white, will treat one another with loyalty and tenderness, out of a sense of merit and the pride of everyone who honors the land in which we were born, black and white alike," it was absurd that with the coming of the republic their rights remained so drastically restricted with regard to those of whites.²

A cursory review of the history of the early decades of the twentieth century will suffice to establish the not just absurd but rather irrational and barbarous manner in

which most politically and economically connected white Cubans repaid the sacrifice and decisive help of their black compatriots for the accumulated power and wealth they now enjoyed in their privileged status. The effects of this included keeping it impossible for blacks to aspire to well-paying and decorous employment, denying them access to education and progress, not to mention the barriers that were created to ensure that blacks could not attain high-level political positions. They included the most blatant rules for social and economic segregation, and obstacles whose origin could be traced to an insurmountable legacy of rules and a value system that condemned them eternally to a lifetime of marginality. They also included rejection, condemnation, and subhuman treatment because of their cultural practices and religious beliefs, as well as constant encounters with and beatings by the police, the purposeful twisting of laws against them, and defamatory campaigns launched against them, in an attempt to justify the murder and incarceration of the leaders, or specially elaborated plans to repress, crush, or reduce them by provoking wars that were nothing more than excuses for wide-scale crime. This is a scene reflective of Cuba's history right during the republican era, after the end of Spanish domination and several decades after the date when the slave system was nominally derogated.

Far from becoming attenuated by the pace of more or less radical transformations and the march of history, the fear of blacks festered under an evil guise that was somewhere between the conscious selfishness and unconscious bewilderment of white Cubans. It would not be excessive to point out that by then, racist cunning, the excess of sacrifices and mistreatment, and war-like torments had already succeeded in eliminating one the

main reasons that gave rise to this pandemic—the fact that there were many more African descendants than whites on our island. According to *Memoria del Censo de la República de Cuba, bajo la administración provisional de Estados Unidos en 1907* (Washington, D.C., 1908, Fourth Section), whites constituted two thirds (1,428,176) of Havana's population, while the population of blacks, mulattoes, Chinese people was 620,804 (Havana was where one half of the island's population, 2,048,980 people, were concentrated).³

By the way, in a brief commentary (as brief as machine-gunning someone in the back) referring to the decline in the number of black inhabitants, the aforementioned *Memoria del Censo* asserted: “their decline in the last fifty years, when seen in the context of the white population, is, no doubt, just more proof of the fact the black race cannot compete with the white one, as has been shown, essentially, on a larger scale in the United States.”⁴

On the other hand, or maybe not, there was no shortage of public figures during republican times that were enthusiastic propagators of the fear of blacks. As usual, they were brilliant, powerful, famous, and charismatic men who were protected (and frequently encouraged) by a judicial system that had a double standard, and guaranteed ample access to the information media. Many examples of this can be verified in numerous newspapers: the *Diario de la Marina*, *El Comercio*, or the *Unión Española*. More than one Cuban history book includes details about the scandalous campaign that appeared in the widely circulating *El Mundo*, to fuel fear (and hate, of course) against blacks. It dedicated an inordinate number of pages to attacks on Santería or Nãñigo practices, among other related things.

In his book *Esclavitud, Abolición y Racismo*, Julio A. Carreras ratifies that this avalanche of negative coverage in *El Mundo* was meant to: “[Corroborate] and strengthen its opinions, [for which reason it reported] alleged denunciations by people who believed to have seen the assumed kidnappers in Guanabacoa, Regla, Cabañas, Jovellanos, and other municipalities where many blacks lived.” About the Nãñigos it wrote to highlight their ferocity and constantly violent nature, which threatened the capital city's tranquility. As a remedy for this problem it recommended an expeditious process: lynching.”⁵

It seems that the Sack Man has wandered a great deal and for a long time through the cities and fields of Cuba. One cannot help feeling a frustration and uneasiness that results in new questions upon confirming that the allegations that gave life to that myth in centuries past are essentially the same ones that today keep the myth alive: black thief, black rapist, black troublemaker, lazy black, threatening black, law-breaking black, and well-mannered black....

As it relates to black religious practices and organizations of African origin, the topic gets even stranger because even if it is true that today they are experiencing unprecedented popularity in Cuba (after having been in obscuring limbo and even being prohibited till the 1990s), it seems to be mostly due to non-cultural interests, having to do more, perhaps, with economics and tourism.

Then we have the phenomenon—picturesque but also unnerving—of a large number of whites (now quite a multitude) that is both attracted by black religious affairs and simultaneously feel great fear upon witnessing these goings on and their representation. The majority refuses to explicitly admit this

fear: they prefer to call it respect, but it is hardly difficult for anyone nowadays to distinguish between the two terms. Similarly, almost anyone can tell that what humans feel when confronted with the enigmatic and unknown, with something they cannot control, something that the elders always kept far away from their understanding and close to being indefensible, is not precisely respect but fear, timid curiosity in the best of cases.

Beyond making amends, of course, we must celebrate this increase in popularity of black Cuban spiritual traditions. It represents a departure from the former status quo and we must start somewhere. Besides, it is fortunately an extremely complicated and delicate matter about which those in the know concern themselves.

For me, it will suffice to provide evidence of the doubts and questions that arise upon confirming more than one coincidence, let us say, between the causes that inspired the fear of blacks at the beginning of the twentieth century, and those which continue to inspire it 100 years later, during a revolution, that is.

A brief examination of indicators

After a brief examination of indicators, we find that unlike what was happening until the end of the 1950s, discriminatory behavior in the twentieth century, during fifty years of revolutionary government, has lost two of the decisive ways in which it was propagated and was able to capture people's psyche. Not one public figure or one single source of information via the media devotes one minute or line to directly and openly promoting fear of blacks. They would not be allowed to; so, how does one explain that after five decades of entirely unopposed,

anti-racist, official discourse, this evil has not lost ground among the idiosyncratic thinking of white Cubans? The establishment of a definitive conclusion about this would perhaps require a lot of reflection and debate, a great deal of analysis, many black and white pages. But there is one possible thing we can say in advance: that the anti-racist discourse was not sufficiently put into practice, with actions and methods that could drive the words home, that could give them substance, sense, dimension, and depth, and allow them to take root.

Laws and good intentions are obviously not enough for the discriminated black and white discriminator to progress jointly, each one leaving behind his respective shortcomings. It also remains to be seen to what degree the lack of an open and public confrontation of the subject might have both helped and hindered the situation. The problems of racism in Cuba never disappeared but only recently has a small group of analysts begun to timidly and rather infrequently broach them in some of the information media, particularly the specialized kind.

While there are many other issues of capital importance to our development, the conceptual debate about racism with equal rights for everyone, even with opposing positions, has also created a vacuum amongst us. Fifty years of silence and subterfuge bring to mind the fable about that emperor who strolls about naked in front of his subjects, as if he were clothed in the finest of garments. Not one subject dares tell him what they see.

Despite the asphyxiating atmosphere of the first decades of the twentieth century, there was always a space for polemical debate. Just as great, astute and competent men promoted the fear of blacks, this social ill was challenged and confronted by other lucid and cultured men with moral authority

and high professional merit. Today, many of these men can be found among the great figures of our culture and our history.

For example, renowned Cuban historian Jorge Ibarra points out to us in his book *Patria, etnia y nación* one of the most revealing controversies over racism to appear in the Havana press. It involves the so-called Mañach-Urrutia debate sustained by Jorge Mañach and Gustavo Urrutia in the “Ideales para una raza” section of the *Diario de la Marina* (April 11-May 3, 1931).⁶ According to Ibarra, at that time, this debate was considered the most important contribution of the era to the black Cuban cultural movement. It was not a discussion carried out from unsalvageable opposite positions nor was it characterized by hostility between the two parties.

Mañach, the son of a Spaniard and a mulatto woman, a Harvard graduate, and a preeminent man due to his wisdom and broad knowledge, generally presented himself as an enemy of discrimination, even when some of his criteria seemed marked by his classist culture. Urrutia, for his part, was the most important figure in black journalism in the twenties and was outstanding not only for his talent and active anti-racist militancy, but also because of his leftist leanings. He liked dealing in dialectical terms.

We are grateful to historian Ibarra for wanting to refresh our memory about the Mañach-Urrutia debate, particularly at this time. The event is vitally important to our understanding of that particular time but still holds useful lessons for us today, among them showing us how sometimes intelligence and conviction are not enough on their own to optimally defend a cause. It also illustrates for us how even the most resolute commitment needs to be confronted and have each

one of its angles studied under a magnifying glass.

Despite his wisdom, for example, Mañach revealed that he believed, generally, that black culture and the rights of black Cubans were the victims of white hegemony because the culture of the latter had reached a superior level. What the learned man from Harvard took for “superior culture,” common sense would define as “different culture.” He saw a cause in what was truly a consequence, and that’s not all. When faced with the racial prejudice of whites, which could more or less be defined as a cultural malformation in them, Mañach thought he saw “the imposition of a race’s biological instinct.”⁷ Thus, Urrutia was ostensibly wrong when he maintained all that was needed to end racial discrimination among Cubans was the creation of a socialist state on the island (his error was never more obvious than here and now). Yet, upon returning to our days, there is one more detail (for now) that could also be useful to us in dealing with these indicators. It is possible that blacks and mestizos might outnumber whites again in today’s Cuba. The last census doesn’t show this but it seems to be the case if one matches what one sees and hears on most of our streets. We also need not forget that while this may not conclusively explain the reason for the current fear of blacks, it certainly has some more or less relevant effect on the problem.

Even if one could confirm both the demographic data and its assumed influence, I doubt this would be enough to change the perception of those of us who do not see on our horizon the danger of a war between the races. José Martí could have written with even more authority today than in 1893 that we Cubans do not feel hindered by a fear of a race war. Our current fears, insecurities, and sorrows are already too many. But those in

the most advantaged positions cannot appreciate a fratricidal war between blacks and whites. Whites here would not seek out that war. It is obviously not in their plans. They

don't want one nor would it be good for them. Meanwhile, black interests are moving in a different, alternative, and perhaps contrary direction to a race war.

NOTES:

1- Martí, José. "Mi raza." *Obras completas*. (La Habana: Editorial de Ciencias Sociales del Instituto Cubano del Libro, 1975): 298/300.

2- Ibid, 299.

3- Carreras, Julio A. *Esclavitud, abolición y racismo*. (La Habana, Editorial de Ciencias Sociales, 1989): 66.

4- Ibid, 66.

5- Ibid, 65.

6- Ibarra Cuesta Jorge. *Patria, etnia y nación*. (La Habana: Editorial de Ciencias Sociales, 2007): 247.

7- Ibid, 251.