

Cuba has a Latent Race Problem?

Armando Soler Hernández
Havana, Cuba

A survey conducted in November 2009 by Cubabarómetro reveals intriguing conclusions about how Cubans see themselves in terms of race. Cuban blacks feel that they are the ones now enduring the worst living conditions, and they have the worst opinion of themselves.

Is it the case that fifty years after the revolutionary government's new, public policy officially abolished racial differences, Cuba's black population is justified in feeling this way? Since 1959, when the new national government decreed its protection for equality, it has not been difficult to find blacks in high priority positions in public view, like sports and public health. Even now, blacks and mulattoes are most often found in artistic performances (music, dance, painting, etc.), and there are many who are members of large organizations like the CDRs (Committee for the Defense of the Revolution) and the Federation of Cuban Women (FMC).

If it is true that Cuban blacks are now more integrated into the nation's social fabric than ever before, why then do they have such a low opinion of themselves? Medical doctor Darsi Ferrer offers us his own conclusions on the subject. In his thirties, he is himself a mestizo of a white father and mulatto mother. He is also a political dissident and directs Cubabarómetro, an independent (non-governmental) polling agency concerned with social statistics. As he describes it:

"We had hardly any material, financial, or professional resources with which to conduct this survey, but the enthusiastic help of many volunteers made up for this, and we pulled it off. I can now more clearly see why blacks are unhappy with their own social image, despite all the state propaganda to the contrary. They are enduring a real social conflict that is taking place not only here, in our own backyard, but everywhere else in the country. Not unlike many whites, blacks see themselves as being forced to eek out livings working in or with the black market, which continues to grow every day. Yet, it is actually a bit different for them."

He gets up and keeps explaining:

"Generally speaking, blacks and mulattos are basically the most extremely poor people in the country; they are the most persecuted by the police. What is curious about this is that there are many blacks and mulattoes in the repressive forces, many of them from the barely developed eastern provinces. People in Havana don't want to work as policemen; they hate that. So, the easterners come to fill that need."

Dr. Ferrer seems to ponder that and adds:

"These country folk, mostly mestizo men, are attracted by the police force's



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particularly high salaries and, as everyone knows, the chance to stay and permanently live here, in Havana, where there are more economic opportunities, like the black market or foreign tourists than back home. This particular kind of police recruit is especially severe with blacks and mulattoes. I know this because a few months back I was kidnapped and taken to an unknown place by two civil policemen who had no identification on them. The whole bad, long trip ended at an unknown place, where I had a “friendly and open meeting” with two white officers from the political police. This is just an anecdote. The most important thing about this incident is those two enormous guys who brutally grabbed me up right from the street: they were two very black men!”

He lights a cigarette and for a moment smokes in silence. Then he goes on:

“It doesn’t matter that I know these ethnic problems from my own personal experience: the survey is what is important. This is not speculation or theory. Its data are real, and greatly surprised me. Mestizos and blacks made up more than fifty percent of all those queried, but they, and even the whites we included, agreed that blacks and mulattoes live in

the worst housing, are the lowest paid employees, constitute the majority of the prison population, are the most affected by a slew of horrible living conditions, and the fact that it is virtually impossible for them to improve this situation.”

He points towards the noisy street behind us and continues:

“We included a particularly speculative question on our survey, out of curiosity, inspired by the recent election of President Barack Obama. We asked how likely it would be for a person of black or mulatto origin to become the president of Cuba in the future. Despite the imaginative nature of the query, and the fact it had no connection to any current reality, we got a truly shocking response. The possibility of a black or mulatto person becoming a president in Cuba was rejected by an astounding 80% of those we surveyed. Furthermore, eighty-five percent of those answers came from blacks and mestizos! Think about it. We were referring to the future! But, that’s not the worst of it. Another unexpected lesson we learned from the data was that a large number of the whites surveyed were indifferent or held a negative opinion of their black brothers.”

Do the authorities know these disturbing facts? It may be the case that the Cuban government has carried out social research with its more or less limited resources, but their results continue to be hidden from public scrutiny. The latest National Census is a good example of this: most of its results are still unknown.

Even so, knowing the new and disturbing results our independent survey yielded, the authorities could at least openly break the silence on the subject of race and begin more professional and open investigations. Yet, if change does not come, that strange official silence will not be enough to stifle the Cuban population's ability to better understand its own problems, as someone quite aware of this shared with me.

It is very easy to understand, among other things, just how badly Cuban blacks and mulattoes live. Anyone can see it, even visiting foreigners. Just observe who the driver is of any motor vehicle you see, no matter which one, even a simple motorcycle, or car, or truck. An astute observer pointed out to me that if one examines any vehicle that goes by, at any time of the day or night, it is very unlikely there will be a black or mulatto driving it.¹ If one takes into account how many of them you see walking, and how many vehicles travel Havana's battered streets, it is really shocking to find that fewer than two out of ten drivers one sees is black or mulatto.

Mulattoes and blacks make up 35% of the island's whole population (if we accept one of the few bit of data published from the National Census). Why aren't there more black drivers? There is surely something going on that limits their opportunities. It is much easier to have a true and accurate perspective on today's nearly forgotten or ignored problems if one has access to these

simple facts, and others, garnered thanks to the wisdom of simple people. Even with its imperfections or professional limitations, the goal of the Cubabarómetro survey is to fill in these information gaps.

Is the new Cuban president more likely to deal openly with this issue? A combination of racial hatred and indifference are not good tools with which to start building anything. Images of sudden racial conflicts are too close for comfort. They might have happened a long time ago, and during a different and distant social scene, but it is impossible not to remember them; they are still perturbing. The unforgettable scenes of "ethnic cleansing" in the former Yugoslavia, or the news of how race and insanity devastated Rwanda, serve as warnings. To just minimize the issue or ignore the possible dangers leads to only one place—a one-way street. The data revealed by the Cubabarómetro survey about the poverty, cruelty, and frustrated sentiments of its participants may be hard to take, but they represent an image of a people united that is radically different from the one projected by the government.

Note:

1- Why does this fact reveal so much about the quality of life of blacks, mulattoes, or anyone else? Leaving aside the cars used by those few, well-paid Cubans who are in the employ of a foreign company; the new cars used by high- and mid-level Cuban government functionaries; and privately owned cars (which are hard to keep running), for a common Cuban to drive a car distinguishes him or her from the rest of the island's population. Being in the driver's seat gives one more personal freedom, and the ability to make money illegally, if one takes the risk. Even if the car is government property, its driver always finds a way to use for his or her own benefit part of the time, by driving passengers or cargo around for a fee. Having access to unfettered money can make a huge difference in one's life, particularly given the State's low salaries and the near inexistence of private business.