

# Article 5

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On goes the discussion. At a fundamental level, citizens, observers, and scholars basically agree that racism is a social reality in Cuba. What is less often concurred is that racism in our country thrives in two most important ways: as a cultural institution and as a political institution. It manifests itself as a feeling of superiority and as racial discrimination.

It was denied for a long time that Cuba was a racist country. I believe this denial had nothing to do with any lack of awareness about Cuban reality, but rather with two, fundamental facts that typify our cultural way of thinking. On the one hand, what we have here is what Marxists superficially, and psychoanalysts professionally, call false consciousness; on the other, our psychological immaturity, our inability to acknowledge social facts and mental attitudes that are more than obvious in our extremely extroverted Cuban culture.

For example, to deny Cuba is racist is to deny almost sixty percent of Cuban humor. Despite our profuse 'black' humor, racism has been denied for more than forty years in Cuba. This reveals the following dilemma: we either are jokers and racists, or we are not racists, and, thus, not funny either.

All this leads me to the following observation. The fact we haven't accepted the institutionalized nature of racism in Cuba doesn't mean that Cuba is not institutionally racist. What it means is that we have lived

with a false sense of what we are and how we live; that we had and still continue having trouble acknowledging and internalizing who we really are in this regard. Nowhere in the world can the existence of racism be denied. That being the case, why should Cuba be any different? Denial almost always signifies affirmation. This is what depth psychology and the history of mentalities both tell us (unfortunately, these are both underdeveloped social sciences in our country).

*Racism is a set of conceptions and attitudes that structurally support the feelings of distinctiveness and superiority of whole human groups over others. It is a constructed value judgment that is inherited and adapted by those human groups, and demands the existence of a clear sense of difference. It is openly or subtly projected as a sense of superiority. All this goes beyond racial prejudice, which manifests itself in traits and attitudes—mental scabs that persist, despite ourselves—that prevail against a virtually non-racist and assumedly clear conscience.*

It is a common error to assume that skin color is the be all and end all of racism. If that were the case, racism would only exist in situations where pigmentation differences caused, structured, and governed social, political, or cultural conflicts, within

impassable boundaries. If this dual context (color difference and impassable boundaries) does not exist, then the source of the conflicts, structures, and hierarchies is seen as tradition— as being due to just personal interests or purist ideologies.

Given this line of thinking, then there shouldn't be any racism at all amongst whites, blacks, Hindus, or indigenous people, but history and anthropology tell us this is not so. Caste-divided India, Nazi Germany, multiethnic Africa, indigenous America, the Persian or Arab Middle East, and Confucian Asia have been and continue being as racist as white Europe is against all other cultural worlds. Not even all of this, obvious as it is, represents any kind of presupposition in a study of racism: its very ambiguity can distort the clarity of any debate. If we cannot agree upon the basic principles of a discussion, would it be possible to get anywhere with it?

Notwithstanding, the concepts of culture and racism coincide in a very fundamental way— symbolically. A symbol signifies: culture, which operates via (linguistic, material, visual, deictic, etc.) symbols are comprised of signs and signifiers. It is semiotic and provides sense and meanings that must be interpreted.

Is a 'madman' a madman? Of course, this linguistic sign should be interpreted within its appropriate cultural context. When used, 'madman' means one thing if it is used in a psychological context, and another when used by tribal urban youth. An important point in all of this is that culture, like thought, is public. If it isn't, it's not culture.

A minimalist definition of culture reveals it is a *system of symbols created by humans by which they give meaning to their own experience*. In Cuba, culture is

seen predominantly as a set of concrete behavioral schemas (customs, ways, traditions, aesthetics, sets of habits) and "external objects" that are assumed by a group of people. This thinking has evolved to a point where culture is seen as a set of control mechanisms (plans, recipes, formulas, rules, instructions that engineers call 'programs', etc.) that govern our conduct.

This is what causes culture's extreme variability and flexibility when attempting to respond to concrete experiences. Here are two very different examples: the conversion to Catholicism of South Koreans and the ability the Japanese have for interpreting Latin cultures cannot be explained by our strictly ethnographic view of culture. They can only be understood in the context of the "cybernetic" reprogramming of cultures that has occurred.

It is from the perspective of the intertwined view of symbol as signifier, of racism and culture, that I see the institutionalized nature of racism in Cuba. I understand negative references to skin color (black) as a somatic symbol of a purely external racism that points to deeper, and, of course, better constructed meanings that organize our sense of other cultural experiences in Cuba, e.g., Yoruba culture,<sup>1</sup> which our Iberian<sup>2</sup> ancestors insist on calling grafted.

That racism is expressed via a subtle, "scientific," "cultural," "modern" and "progressive" rejection from the perspective of a different series of constructed signifiers that also organize our sense of cultural experiences in Cuba. Yet, there is something important here to consider. Unlike our earlier cultural experiences, these latter ones have become hegemonic and supreme from within their own culture, and aspire to be the only



“legitimate” ones when it comes to what are considered the “highest” motives. Once that hegemony becomes rationalized, it becomes “scientific” and “forward thinking,” and racism becomes institutionalized in such a way that it consciously prioritizes and stratifies “Cuban culture.”

Somewhere in a prestigious place in Havana I heard a Protestant authority referring to the marked expansion of religions of African origin, as well as to the fact that certain worldviews did not serve nation-building purposes. It is not my intention to dialogue with Christianity at this time. But I do want to dialogue with Communism, because it wholeheartedly embraces that same view and has managed to bring this to the attention of the upper echelons in Cuba.

Why this particular view of things? Nearly all schools of political thought have some basis in anthropological perspectives.

Interestingly, the Communist focus was better able to entrench itself in the space that Catholicism had already so thoroughly prepared. From this arose a well-ensconced anthropological gaze founded upon two notions of the evolution of human thought that had evolved by the 1950s.

One saw those human thought processes that Sigmund Freud called “primary” (substitution, inversion, condensation, abreaction, etc.) as phylogenetic and anterior to those he called “secondary” (directed, logically organized reasoning, etc.). Anthropology based this supposition on the belief that it is possible to identify cultural constructions and modes of thought. Accordingly, human groups in Cuba without cultural resources like modern science (read Marxism) are judged *ipso facto* as lacking a real capacity for the intellection needed for Freud’s secondary processes. This would mean that the

Yorubas cannot think in the same way that Iberians do.

The second supposition arose as a reaction to this warp of mistakes, and postulated that it is not only a prerequisite to have an essentially modern thinking human mind in order to acquire culture (which does not differentiate the mental capacity of a Yoruba from that of an Iberian), but that the growth of that culture itself cannot have had a significant effect on mental evolution. Hence, the corollary of the unified psychic nature of humanity, which totally contradicts any argument for a primitive mentality, and confirms that there are no essential differences in the natural and fundamental ways in which peoples of different races think. Freud's primary and secondary processes are always present in all races at the same time. The supposition that the growth of culture caused no significant effect on mental evolution has begun to fade as anthropology, itself, progresses.

It is from this anthropological perspective that identifies cultural constructs and ways of thinking that the concept of superior modes of thinking, from which Marxism stems, arose. They belong to only a few cultures and are lacking in others. Therefore, when a state's political organization uses as its foundation the particular sort of thinking that comes from this particular anthropological perspective, this leaves only one possibility: to discriminate against Jean-Jacques' noble savage. All one needs is Rousseau or Lévy-Bruhl's illogical (magical) way of thinking to postulate that Iberians do indeed have the ability, and, thus, the legitimate right to define the state's entire structure and foundation. That is how discrimination becomes politically institutionalized.

Liberal political thought freed itself from this phenomenon not because it was

founded upon racist ideas but because it avoided organizing the state according to closed and exclusionary a symbolic construct of signifiers. The traditional liberal construct saw Yorubas, and their 'magical thinking,' as not capable of logical thinking, which naturally led to liberals impeding Yoruba's access to politics. Yet, this was achieved by diffusely segregating them from within society. The Communist government has not been able to eradicate this institutionalized racism because it believes Yorubas, and their culture, incapable of producing a specific sort of scientific thought that can serve the state.

This anthropological perspective creates a paradox for the Communist state: it is attempting to incorporate Yorubas into its society as individuals, but culturally segregates them from politics. Hence, arises state racism: a desire to organize according to an Iberian worldview that believes itself superior to the Yoruba worldview with which it coexists. An anthropological error is forcing the state to attempt to liberate the 'others.' Why is it so hard to discern this institutionalized racism? There are three reasons:

- An exclusively political focus on ideology. Critics would tend to say that ideology involves the state's political organization as it relates to a society and its citizens. It should be neutral to all other cultural, religious, magical or cult phenomena: ideology is neutral, something that the history of Marxist and Islamic states denies.

The bad news for those critics is that even if it is true that ideology is a constructed reaction to equally constructed tensions in a particular social role, it also provides a symbolic escape from that tension. Thus, it turns into a special type of symbolic system

suited for evaluating the collective. When it is constructed as such a system of symbols, ideology can come to occupy the same space that other manmade, disappearing, symbolic systems always have or used to embody. If a system of symbols gives my experience meaning, what then is the most appropriate way to respond to my specific tensions? Politics is one of the most vital tensions, at least in modern times.

The Yoruba response to these tensions will never be the same as a Marxist one. Well-known Havana *babalawo* Victor Betancourt has proved that religions of African origin have an ancestral response to these sorts of tensions. So the question is ‘just how does this kind of civic, political response fare in the face of institutionalized political racism?’ The same could be asked of Christian responses.

Political ideologies emerge precisely when other symbolic systems are in crisis, or when they have not sufficiently constructed the sense and limits of a specific collective. The fact that Marxism did not resist competing with diverse forms of Islam is an example of how strong symbolic constructions are impermeable, even at a political level. Ignoring anthropology, Marxist states declare that symbolic systems or signs constructed by “Marxist” science are not only more appropriate, but that they are the only legitimate ones for constructing political experiences from the state and within society. This explains why Marxist states of yore, and those in existence now, institutionalize racism. This is not for lack of moral progress but rather due to an excess of scientificity and superiority. The paradox and schizophrenia that define them are what fight the racism they construct.

- The “progressive” perspective of this specific ideology, in two ways: the human progress and scientific progress that necessarily come with it.

In this case, human progress is understood as the creation of a general wellbeing for the majority through scientific developments, and the state’s productivity and rational organization within an ideological context. Scientific progress is meant to eliminate the old magical and religious trappings of a “primitive” view of man, and another transcendent view of the “miseries” that our world intended to resolve via “pre-scientific” and “alienating” symbolic manifestations.

- An “ethnic mix” of different symbolic systems. Blacks become “Marxists” (the only way a society can become Marxist, religiously) and whites become Yorubas (in a cultural and religious sense).

This ethnic mixture “masks” an ideology’s racism because it avoids associating cultural identification with a particular skin color—the traditional external marker of racism. However, as we saw earlier, skin color is no more than a somatic and superficial identification of profound cultural signifiers, behavioral norms, feelings of coexistence, and worldviews that are appropriated and reappropriated by whole human groups without regard to skin color. Thus, racism is not constructed ethnically, but according to worldview.

With his or her entire symbolic apparatus, a Communist has “abilities, rights, and a legitimacy” that a Yoruba doesn’t have, precisely because of his or her specific symbolic system, even if the former is black and the latter is white. Thus, blacks appear to have been “assimilated” by the dominant white

symbolic system, and whites to have “deserted” for a dominated one. If racism persists along ethnic lines, this is because of the symbolic system’s ethnic origin, and its acceptance as being justifiably dominant, which is confusing. This explains why blacks who adopt it are seen as “assimilating” and “losing” their condition as blacks during the process, and whites as “regressing” and “earning” their condition as blacks because of their “conduct.” This has created an ideological crisis of cultural identity that complicates the legitimacy of how people decide to which group they belong or how they identify. A black Marxist tends to feel that he or she is superior to a black Yoruba, and distances his or her ties to the mostly unconverted group. It is impossible to practice Santería and be a Marxist at the same time, even in an effort to avoid being identified with “backwardness” or “regression.” If, as a representative of the one third of the black population in Cuba that is educated, I did not have to identify in this manner from the start, why should I have to do so now?

For their part, the Iberian “converts” distance themselves from their own, exaggerating their new identities in a manner that most expressively “identifies” them with the “primitive culture,” and as having rejected the civic models of their “original Iberian” world.

In the end, forced hegemonies and discrimination weaken mutual exchanges in civilized civil coexistence, and lead people to doubt something irrefutable: an individual’s right to choose his or her own ideology without regard for racial origin. In other words, a white cultural “convert” legitimates and reinforces black “incivility,” but an enlightened black Marxist reinforces and legitimates domination, an outcome that serves as an obstacle in the Cuban nation’s full cultural

realization. Only by deconstructing “skin” was it possible to establish a more encompassing and profound concept of racism, as scholarship about anti-Semitism and Nazi ideology, and lesser-known Asian and Arabic racisms, have clearly shown. This is the only way to understand the regional racism, basically against eastern Cubans, that is taking root on the island. The concept of *Palestinaje*<sup>3</sup> [‘Palestination’] merits analysis by Cuban anthropologists and sociologists.

The godless theism and anti-pagan idolatry of Marxism were not able to produce symbolic representations effective enough to resolve old and new tensions, but they were able to take over the state and politics, which exposes their repressive and blatant racism. So, in light of the Marxist-Leninist failure as a symbolic system, how does one explain the Cuban Constitution’s Article 5?

Just as other earlier symbolic systems failed in their attempt to give meaning to Cuban society’s civic and political life, Marxism failed because of the irremediable return of old symbolic systems to Cuban culture—Catholicism, religions of African origin, Protestantism, and the Eastern philosophies and practices that have been embraced recently by Cuba’s ever postmodern culture. Even so, one million militant Communists dominate more or less six million Cubans who practice some form or another of the most popular religions in Cuba; a culturally scandalous situation. It is a minority that governs a majority: this could be seen as a state-sponsored state of cultural siege.

An interesting aspect of this siege is that it constitutionally legitimates itself in the context of an ideological vacuum that no longer generates authentic feelings of belonging, and on a civic de-legitimization of the only symbolic representations that currently offer Cubans any way out. In its



effort to create and maintain its hegemony by constitutionally controlling the state's apparatus and all of society, and not by letting the population's different value systems compete, the government has institutionalized racism via Article 5 of the current Constitution. Any prohibition imposed on the civic participation of different symbolic systems [which is the arena in which politics are legitimated] is racist by nature.

Article 5. "The Communist Party of Cuba, a follower of Martí's ideas and of Marxism-Leninism, and the organized vanguard of the Cuban nation, is the highest leading force of society and of the state, which organizes and guides the common effort toward the goals of the

construction of socialism and the progress toward a communist society."

This is not a joke. This is true. If anyone doubts this, he or she should just read the Cuban Constitution. Furthermore, this could be seen as normal in Cuba, but it is most certainly scandalous that a political constitution postulates this pretension, particularly in the twenty-first century. This is not just morally scandalous but also a cultural and sociological anachronism, as is the racial discrimination it institutes (just the idea of considering one's self as superior is racist, writing it is a confession of racism).

In an age when it seemed society's "scientific progress" and culture would dissolve religious ideologies, it might seem normal that the *future* and inevitable *citizen* focuses

on how he or she *should be* politically, within the state's complicated apparatus. This could be denounced as totalitarianism from a political and ideological point of view, and attacked, in the context of rights and freedom. Yet, within a context of *racial* homogeneity, it could be considered culturally legitimate, in the modern sense of the term. This is a scientific perspective of society that foresaw a "correct" and "inevitable" manifestation of a cultural and anthropological march forward that only books and institutions promoted.

This last point can be seen more clearly in a North Korean anthropological context. The Korean concept of *Suche*<sup>4</sup> is uncontested by culture because it anthropologically fits well within a traditional Confucian framework, ethnic homogeneity, and the state's Stalinist religion. Only a legal denunciation can contest this; it would not be possible from a cultural position. There is no cultural gap there, but neither is there an "inevitable" anthropological march forward. This process is more akin to a cultural prolongation, like old wine in a new barrel. In Cuba today, where what was once repressed has made a comeback, Article 5 of the Cuban Constitution lacks both cultural and sociological legitimacy. Its persistence could be seen, if you will, as the manifestation of the totalitarian will of a small group of men and women. Yet, the institutionalized racism that legally upholds it is just as important, from an anthropological point of view.

The Marxist system of symbols is incompatible with that of the Yoruba. A person's place, sense of coexistence; the types of relationships people establish amongst themselves; the hierarchical structures that stem from a person's own individual view of nature, of earthly life and the hereafter; and even his or her understanding of the human

body, death, and the limitations they impose; and the transgressions they promote through the respective symbolic actions they inspire, can coexist socially only by the creation of a common space free of any arbitrary limitation on the symbolic coherence of our cultural diversity.

If those arbitrary limitations that each culture possesses become law, and block any particular culture's access to civic engagement, the only thing that results from this is the institutionalization of racism and a crime against culture, both of which threaten the stability of any nation-building project. The Cuban state's incoherence and inconsistency stems precisely from its anthropological inconsistencies and incoherency. Article 5 of the Cuban Constitution is the "no go" of the nation's culture.

#### Notes:

1- Yorubas: one of the many original ethnic groups of Nigeria that was brought mostly to Cuba during the slave trade.

2- Iberian: one of the principal ethnic groups that populated the Iberian Peninsula and became 'Spanish.' Like the term Yoruba, Iberian is used to define a distinct ethnic identity.

3- *Palestinaje*, from *Palestinean*. In Cuba, the ethnonym *Palestinean*, which functions as a geographic inference, is used to refer to people born in the eastern regions of the island: Las Tunas, Holguín, Granma, Santiago de Cuba and Guantánamo. It is a pejorative term that represents two concepts: immigration and lack of civilization. It must be combated beyond just sociological situations because it is doubly discriminatory against both Middle Eastern *Palestineans* and easterners in Cuba.

4- '*Suche*.' A specialized version of Stalinist doctrine in North Korea, founded by Kim Il Sung.