

Where is the difference?

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This is my thesis: *The difference between racial discrimination in Cuba and the United States might be in the fact that African Americans in the United States started with the first step—debates. Through them, blacks made themselves seen, made others take them into account within their ultra racist society. This brought about recognition and acceptance. Today, blacks and whites in the United States enjoy equal rights. Cubans, on the other hand, started with the last step, that is, by blacks as citizens accepting that they “had” to live next to whites. That was the beginning of a superficial relationship between them, although always under the assumption that blacks were there thanks to whites. We have not yet gone through the first essential step necessary for establishing racial identity: debates.*

I would now like to prove my thesis by explaining some problems. What law says that blacks cannot go to school or receive medical attention? What law says that blacks are different from whites? What moral precept allows whites dare enough to lynch blacks? Do they happen to know if this human being has a family waiting for him after work? Where are the rights that have

allowed whites to believe themselves superior to blacks?

Lynching was still in its infancy in U.S. civil society during the earliest years of the last century, even though slavery had been abolished and both races were supposed to have the same rights. Yet, discrimination, a bloody and brutal discrimination that placed a barrier between whites and blacks, continued.

Blacks began getting together amongst themselves in order to find their own way to combat all the arguments that justified why whites believed themselves to be the only ones with rights; the only and authentic human beings. Motivated by wanting to make their rights a reality, black citizens began to hold public debates and start a revolution, through words, against everything that had been institutionalized.

A group of students from a historically black college, Wiley University, began to ready themselves for great public debates. Truth was their weapon: it could be seen in the actions of the very same human beings. The wisdom and audacity of this group was so convincing, they were invited to debate at a prestigious whites-only university: Harvard.

The topic was the morality or immorality of civil disobedience. They adopted Gandhi, the father of this sort of struggle, as their symbol. This intense, high-level and, above all, civilized debate culminated in a black speaker quoting Saint Augustine, when he said that if a law is unjust, it should not be accepted as a law. So which was better, civil disobedience or violence? The speaker ended up thanking God that blacks in the U.S. had opted for the former.

Because there is a great difference: with civil disobedience, it is not always a question of a possibly unjust law, whereas violence always generates violence and almost never brings with it constructive learning, nor does it overcome the injustice of discriminatory laws.

This was the topic of the 2007 U.S. film *The Great Debaters*, which was directed by Denzel Washington, and made a huge impact on black Cuban society. It is as if the veil had been lifted to reveal the lack of progress from which we've suffered, not just over the Revolution's past fifty years, but since Cuba became independent from Spain, in 1898.

Discrimination in Cuban society has been pretty subtle. At the beginning, during slavery times, it was quite evident and marked, even if one could see a mestizo or two in the aristocracy's great halls. This was a symbol of miscegenation and acceptance. There were also free blacks and mestizos, with more rights than slaves, who lived under the authority and suffered the cruelty of their masters. When Cuba became independent, and a republic, in 1902, all blacks were free, slavery having been abolished in 1886, and the country's laws applying to all citizens, regardless of race or color.

Black social clubs were created, where some blacks got together to learn about and affirm their identities as people who were

somehow different from whites. In 1908, the first Independent Party of Color was also created. Curiously, it had no counterparts in Brazil, in the United States, or other parts of the western hemisphere.

Blacks entered governing echelons, thanks to their intelligence or audacity. They could be found functioning as leaders and union activists, all over Cuba. Before the first half of the twentieth century was over, a black man had already reached the island's pinnacle of power, becoming a representative or senator. This was very different from what was going on in the United States at that time, where blacks might not have been slaves, but also didn't have the same rights as whites, and were victims of bloody discrimination.

According to Fidel Castro, in his written self-defense *La historia me absolverá* [History Will Absolve Me] (1953), race was not a problem that needed to be solved after the triumph of the Revolution. For Cuban whites, blacks were just simply people who coexisted with them, who could even sit with them at the table and eat. But they were always considered 'blacks,' inferior beings with strange hair, ugly and crude faces, possessing nothing enviable. This is the reason why there seemed to be a mixed people, a population of 'united' whites and blacks, when the revolutionaries came to power.

This supposed acceptance of blacks on the part of white folks didn't really eradicate racial prejudice: it reinforced it. Without offering specific examples, blacks have assumed the customs and values of a race that is different from their own: the white race. They see themselves reflected in the fine faces of white men, of blue-eyed women and abundant locks. This has caused blacks to disappear, to cease existing. Yet half of Cuba's population is black and mestizo, but Cuba's

population is white, both culturally and according to the census. But its inferior cultural underpinnings are folkloric. The mass media have always privileged the white man's vision. That is the very same white man who proudly embraces his black brother, invites him to coffee, and tells his wife, "He is my friend." But this is not an equal relationship: whites do not feel or respect the race's power; they do not acknowledge African traditions, except for the purpose of amusement and exotic forays. They see a person (a black man) with worries just like their own, inherited ones, but they do not appear to be worried about or for blacks; that is, the white man does not see the black man.

When do blacks become visible? When we go to marginal neighborhoods and find that most of their inhabitants are blacks who speak badly and behave boldly. That is where Cuba discovers her limitations: *he had to be black*. Or when we see a young blonde who has fallen in love with her affable and intelligent schoolmate, except that he has a major defect: he is black. That is when the parents do see the black man: like an invasion. He is no longer a possible friend or brother. Another way in which blacks become visible is when a young black woman competes for a high-level position in any sort of management. All of a sudden her flat face and her big and thick lips are incompatible with the representative aesthetics one sees in businesses. This is when we realize that we are not all equal, that blacks are just 'ugly': they do not match our society's reigning canon for 'beauty.'

Racism in Cuba operates in a manner that parallels the farce that we are all equal. The way in which whites behave keeps blacks from realizing that they must be recognized and accepted as they are, so they reject and underestimate themselves. Cuba did not wit-

ness the kinds of debates that were seen in U.S. society, where blacks did not beg to be allowed to mix with whites but rather fought, with words, in this case, to be taken into account and become visible. This explains why the arrival today of a black U.S. president is like a reward for an unrelenting struggle that has seen no submission, acquiescence or underestimation of a race that was brought from Africa—the cradle of an also invisible humanity.

The aforementioned film has caused a part of the black Cuban population to awaken. It has seen a way to attain a new level of coexistence for whites and blacks. In contemporary Cuba we need debates, an exchange of ideas, knowledge of theories concerning human behavior, and an analysis of differences and similarities. It is never too late, if one awakens. It is now time for Cuban blacks to first see themselves, for them to stand before a mirror so they can make out their profiles, their features; so they can see their own beauty and not the one interracial societies impose. Then, they need to look inside themselves for everything they have to offer, their intelligence, wellbeing, solidarity, so they can see in everything they do the image of what they saw in the mirror.

I have completed my thesis. Which was better, laying out a lengthy explanation of how blacks should be accepted and respected, so they can enjoy visibility in our society, or pretending that everything was okay, and that blacks could get together with whites, enjoy equal rights with them, and enjoy the fruits of inferiority?