

The Monologue Continues

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One might be able to see a ray of hope and realism while listening to proposals and analyses by Cuban official personnel who intentionally and hegemonically control the closed and government-controlled debate spaces that are timidly opening up, thanks to strong pressure and difficult questions coming mostly from outside Cuba. This recent and incipient lightening up is clearly a response to growing disquiet stemming from the poor and backward state of integration and racial equality in Cuban society.

Academics and activists, who until quite recently denied the existence of race problems in Cuba, or who mediated evaluations of the them, are now ratcheting up the tone of their analyses in these elite and government-controlled spaces more out of personal interest than personal conviction. They are calling for a need for open and public debate as a way of confronting the problem and finding a solution to the structural and cultural deficiencies that are keeping Cuban blacks and mestizos at a true disadvantage, a situation that fifty years of egalitarian rhetoric and social stagnation has not resolved but has only served to complicate.

An attempt to enjoy this overnight opening up ended in disaster, spawning fear among the official intelligentsia who are working on the problem, when staged police actions kept members of the Citizen's Committee for Racial

Integration (CIR) from attending relevant events at the headquarters of the José Martí National Library and the National Union of Cuban Writers and Artists (UNEAC) on the 18th and 20th of March, 2009, respectively.

In Cuban society, where things are divided into two categories—obligatory and prohibited, where it is hardly newsworthy when repressive powers forcefully co-opt the development or exercise of citizens' rights, it is more than just worrisome when they actually do so at the precise moment high-level representatives of the European Union are fawning over the ability they see for Cuba, with its reality, and the government's attitude to evolve.

A small group of civic activists was expelled from supposedly public cultural spaces. Its only sin, initiating a discussion: speaking. That day, the 20th, I could not get over hearing the Workshop Director, who was obviously feeling the effects of being pressured, say that even though the physical presence of independent activists was admissible, that once there they should remain quiet. This explains why my presentation, "Cuba and its Race Issues" (at the same location, on March 12th), caused a very difficult situation for the organizers. It could have jeopardized the very existence of those kinds of spaces, where an exchange of ideas and debate are possible.

A participant at the event who was the one who actually closed the door to CIR mem-

bers was later able to confirm that the reputed academic, who for years denied the existence of race problems in Cuba but has now become a principal spokesperson for them, revealed himself to be a merciless inquisitor who was not going to allow anyone to speak to the race issue from a context outside that of the Revolution. It seems that in their alienated desperation those gentlemen are incapable of seeing how even after all the lies and repression, there are many people in Cuba still willing to pay the price for freedom and what is right.

While Cuba's social reality crudely exposes the inequality and fractures that even the regime itself can no longer deny, like the fact that the government's declaration that the race problem was resolved, and that its decades long repression of any discussion of it actually worsened it, it seems that this very same regime wants to continue controlling spaces available for intellectual exchange, despite the fact it would have to sow terror among the enlightened vanguard and militarily occupy the temples of national culture.

It is both childish and criminal to think that the problem can be confronted and resolved by employing the same methods and ideas that complicated and worsened it. The social fractures are so large that they might be irreversible, thanks precisely to that censorship, the silence and manipulation that those in power want to continue to impose, so they can divorce words from deeds, and refuse to admit that there is no one way to see things at this stage of our human development.

The lamentable spectacle at the UNEAC, which became overrun by threatening civil agents, and numerous fearful, famous intellectuals trembling because of the presence of three inoffensive, peaceful, and polite activists, reaffirmed for the leaders and members of the CIR their irrevocable determination to achieve at whatever price their goal, with truth and

justice. It once more showed us that the true original sin is not having a freely conceived and expressed personal opinion, despite the current intolerance that dominates us (governing is a whole other thing).

Obviously, even if the rhetoric says differently, the monologue continues among those who govern. With all due respect and humility, we say to our brothers who are members of the official intelligentsia that we deeply regret the bad time we made them endure, but we have no other option to pursue in our lifetime but to continue to commit sins.

Breaking Down Impunity

An intervention by Leonardo Calvo at a workshop titled "Cuba and its Racial Issues" (at the headquarters of the National Union of Cuban Writers and Artists [UNEAC], on March 12th, 2009).

We could dedicate this profound debate to white Cubans who have Sickle Cell anemia and keloids. There are some things, among those that concern us, that can easily be resolved. The person who is speaking to you is someone who does not show his identification card to the police, knowing full well the circumstantial mishap this can provoke. It is not difficult to figure out that the reason for this persistent attention from the police is what they call "the profile," something that could be easily accepted if we could manage to get the police to worry about arresting people red-handed, *in fraganti*, and not because of their physical characteristics. That being the case, we might be able to prove that blacks commit more crimes than whites, but due to a much less subjective reason.

There are other, much more complex dimensions to this issue. As the distinguished Elvira Cervera says, we live in a mestizo country where some of us are so dark we look black; and others so white they seem white; a country that has gone through an intense process of miscegenation and where for many years blacks have attained access to knowledge and personal growth. Yet, despite this, one cannot see this reflected in certain symbols or structures, and in access to certain spaces.

All of Latin America is going through a struggle to rescue and appreciate its African heritage. In Argentina, the country that has most successfully 'disappeared' its blacks, and where the whitening impulse is present even at the Constitutional level, there are two million people of African descent who are still invisible, even from soccer. But there are now civic spaces and institutional mechanisms that are leading this struggle and search.

This debate might be very stimulating and edifying, but it lacks something. We must find ways and spaces in which to face this problem, because the word 'solution' means something monumental; in this case and, as such, finding it will be quite challenging when we take the debate about racism and discrimination to schoolrooms, neighborhoods, ghettos, and television.

We all already know that the next soap opera won't have any blacks in it,

even though we don't yet know its title. But, if when a director or creative artist finishes his or her work, play, or film, and sees that African descendants are not represented or acknowledged as they should be, and he or she knows there are citizens with a voice, groups with a voice, and institutions with a voice that are prepared to fight this omission, then he or she will begin to have a change of heart and perspective.

If a humorist knows that a joke he or she is going to share with millions of television fans is racist, so offensive, and unnecessary, and that it will also be heard by citizens with a voice, groups with a voice, and institutions with a voice prepared to fight this reprehensible behavior, attitudes and perspectives will be begin to change.

The history of blacks in Cuba is a lengthy saga of suffering, exclusion, and ignorance, but also a difficult path filled with many struggles and efforts to face this hard reality. Only when our children come out of school knowing the truth about how blacks have faced these difficulties and obstacles—that they were jumping off slave ships and drowning, to avoid arriving in the Americas as slaves, and being massacred over a period of two centuries, while defending their self-respect, pride, and identity, will we begin to see ourselves a different way. Only then will we begin to treat each other differently. Most importantly, only then will we begin to be truly different, as a society.