

The Silenced Equation

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Race and marginalization is the equation that Cuban social sciences dare not openly, consistently, and systematically discuss in the public arena. Such an equation is considered a dirty word, a filthy zone of Cuban reality, seen by some as a visible wart on Cuban society.

The problem is that the meanings of both the terms that make up this equation are constructed upon an authoritarian logic of social and political exclusion. They constitute the damaged fabric of Cuban society, which is characterized by the poverty and marginalization that is endured by a large group of people, particularly blacks and *mestizos*, as a result of the social and political dynamics at play via inequality and difference.

Through the conditions of the socialism that was being constructed, such processes of impoverishment and marginalization came to be a dark area that remained hidden under its growing, almost religious, veil. It essentially mandated the social direction in which society could and could not develop. Even today, categories and concepts such as 'culture of violence,' 'marginalized culture,' 'culture of the lowest,' and 'subculture' still serve to justify a milieu that supports holding back blacks and *mestizos* in a society where racism, discrimination, and prejudice are still rooted, but are also

free to roam. They are elements of a culture of camouflage, just like the philosophy of miscegenation. Racism is a bitter conflict connected to our emotional education, as well as to *machismo* and homophobia. It is a symbolic representation of a violent practice, like an area in which water's possible transparency becomes muddied. Thus, part of our nightmare has never been examined: it is one kink in a society beaten by a long training period for the exercise of violence and a dual morality—it is a society that is both an accomplice and prisoner of prejudice.

Marginality is a semi-shrouded reality. It is masked by what is distasteful; a path not only created by economic crisis, as some try to see, but also born of intolerance, prejudices, indifference, and lack of political will—a path traversed by diverse pilgrims (homosexuals, prostitutes, drug addicts, alcoholics, rockers, voyeurs, misogynists, orgiasts, and blacks who are marked by their race) who do not enjoy the equal rights the revolutionary project, and much of the rhetoric, that attempted to programmatically address this issue.

Rooted as it is, marginality is greater than the city's actual boundaries and establishes its own borders within the city's interior. It is a border with two cities, and often difficult for tourists to find. One of these cities is made up



“La Habana Azul”

of insalubrious tenement yards and neighborhoods, within the city’s inner limits. They continue to be some of the most vulnerable places where one sees evidence of spatial segregation in Havana. They lack the means with which to physically improve their environment. There are two cities in Havana—one public, another private. In them, new forms of social identity are rehearsed: they are “La Habana Azul” and “La Habana Sur.”

The latter is a nocturnal city. It is marginal, basically material, Bohemian, full of sex and violence, and punished by difference. It is a city of desire and pleasure, where loneliness and anonymity plague its inhabitants, and where the subversion of the basic rules of cohabitation is promoted.

“La Habana Azul” is that other city. It ignores ‘others’ but nonetheless shares its space with them. It is the city’s pride, a city of exclusionary borders—an enclave in which an earlier and current dominant class of privileged

people live. Its development brought with it the beginning of diverse kinds of segregation that keeps its distance from areas with social problems. It reflects physical segregation on account of skin color. There is no room within it for people of mid-level or low wages. They are like islands of wealth where high-rise beehives are erected. In them live VIPs with private guards, and emerging neighborhoods with businesses and high-level commercial districts.

On the contrary, “La Habana Sur” is the city’s underbelly, pure filthy realism, an entity unknown or unrecognized by official media rhetoric. It practically exists so that its interior can reproduce the cultural markers of poverty and marginalization (domestic violence, incestuous relations, overcrowding, kids dropping out of school, etc.). Survival is king there. It is a place, a fragment of city immersed in misery’s lifeless waters: anonymity, insalubrious settlements that are like bubbling, soon to erupt volcanoes; dives splattered by the tor-



“La Habana Sur”

ment of indigence, and contaminated by porno-misery. Its inhabitants are mostly blacks and *mestizos* who are blamed for altering the social equilibrium.

“La Habana Sur” is incredibly huge—more on account of its living conditions than for its geography. According to official figures, it has 46 condemnable settlements and 114 specific points spread out over 15 municipalities. Mind you, these numbers do not include the horrors of those who still inhabit Havana tenement yards in which not only Cuban migrants known pejoratively as *palestinos* [Palestineans] live, but also people from the full racial spectrum.

The Atares, San Leopoldo, La Corbata, Zamora, El Palenque, Puente Negro, Los Tostones, Simba, Las Piedras, Los Mangos,

Polvo de Tierra, El Moro, Cayo Hueso, and El Palmar neighborhoods are some of the specific, marginal areas inhabited by black Cubans. Pain, rage, and desperation are sovereign in them. Their inhabitant’s lives are marked by these scourges, which leave visible scars because they reveal the arbitrary opposition to beauty and social commitment to which these people are condemned. The whip of discrimination is unfortunately still cracking on the social, cultural, and political map of Cuban society.

We are yet unable to get rid of these evils. The black part of our identity as Cubans continues to be seen as a blemish on the collective Cuban body. It is up to all of us to deconstruct and destroy the masks. Public intervention is practically the only way in which we can contribute to our search for freedom.