

Blacks and *Mestizos*: An At-Risk Group

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The notion of an archipelago transcends geography. Differences marked by spatial and territorial inequalities—that are also economic—get reproduced within a particular nation's space. The notion of marginality, legitimacy/illegitimacy, and legality/illegality have lost most of their defining contours in Cuba, due to people's need to survive at a time of crisis.

After fifty years of a process as variable as the one endured in Cuba, spaces and territories have mutated according to the opportunities dictated by the emergency at hand. Black and *mestizo* population groups have participated in those changes as a result of life opportunities becoming homogenized, which began with the political transformation that started in 1959.

Along with this process came new and inevitable inequities that joined the already inherited ones. Starting in 1976, the political-administrative fragmentation of the island's territory into 14 provinces, and a reduction in the number of municipalities, created new territorial inequalities with relation to the possibility to organize productively. The crisis of the 1990s increased these inequalities with regard to living conditions and consumer power, as well as the impact of these social transformations on societal groups. For example, a neurosurgeon who makes 800 Cuban

pesos a month gives a patient back his or her health, but someone who rents rooms to foreigners makes 800 convertible *pesos* (CUCs) in the same amount of time.

Self-employment was blamed for being one of reasons for the loss of the homogeneity in Cuban life that was intended by the revolutionary process. Yet, opportunities are not exclusively and strictly tied to this new form of work. An imbalanced distribution of resources, and unfavorable, material living conditions, increased. In many cases, they got much worse in neighborhoods and communities with precarious living conditions. This is particularly true where inherited inequities and the fact that no socially committed policies for the territorial, collective good, to ensure social assistance and security, were created to oppose them.

Black and *mestizo* population groups that inhabit those spaces, who already had their own social networks, found that they had to superimpose new political networks—but they included in them emergency contingencies with which they were already familiar, and had already employed. Thus, spatial and territorial realities that were tempered by need and contingency became one of the alternative solutions to difficulties during the still enduring crisis that came about at the end of the 1980s.



Of course, I am alluding to the rise of illegal neighborhoods in Havana and its periphery, and the population surge—of black and *mestizo* migrants mostly from the eastern provinces—in municipalities such as Centro Habana, 10 de Octubre, and Cerro.

Family networks started taking in relatives and friends in urban municipalities. Old neighbors and a floating population became uprooted upon seeing that their chances for well-paid work, or just simply a job in their area, decreased. Many joined the ranks of construction workers, police agents, and food workers, but another large portion of this group with little education and lacking technical skills kept reproducing marginal acts of survival like reselling things, theft, prostitution, drugs, etc.

Given there is a fine line between what is legal and illegal, especially because it is hard to distinguish between what is legitimate and illegitimate in Cuba, criminal activity increased. This affected all social groups, but most particularly blacks and *mestizos*, who became the focused target of institutional repressive forces. The number of blacks and *mestizos*

arrested or stopped on the street increased; they fell victim to racial profiling and became automatically associated with marginality.

Specialists confirm that blacks and *mestizos* run a greater risk of contracting sexually transmitted diseases than other population groups, because they inhabit socially disadvantaged neighborhoods, exchange sex with foreigners for money, or engage in immense promiscuity with members of their own group. Little schooling and the reproduction of certain traditional behaviors contribute to this, as well.

A lack of trustworthy networks and bridges to other kinds of spaces cause this group, which bears the greatest number of inherited inequities, and has reproduced illegal and marginal alternatives to be able to escape the crisis, to perpetuate risky behavior. In the meantime, they are also denied the opportunities that social reorganization, a reconfiguration of the borders, and personal improvement might offer, despite the fact they are in a favorable position to invest their energies in finding solutions to their problems through study or work.