

Challenging *Challenges*

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“Desafiando *Desafios*” is the general title of an essay with which I intend to critique Cuban academic Esteban Morales Domínguez’s book *Desafíos de la problemática racial en Cuba* [Challenges of the Race Problem in Cuba]. I have been crafting it gradually, and this article is the first in a series I will initially publish in the journal *ISLAS*, and later have included in *Identidades*, a recently debuted journal on race issues published by the Citizens’ Committee for Racial Integration. “Desafiando *Desafios*” is a conceptual provocation that begins by challenging the focus attempted in Morales Domínguez’s book on Cuba’s race problem.

In her book *Philosophy in a new Key*, Susanne Langer observes that some ideas explode onto a country’s intellectual scene with tremendous force, the reasons for this being many. On the one hand is the sense that one needs a principle or theory to explain certain observable, long-time, and persistent phenomena that are nonetheless never quite completely clear to or understood by the intellectual elite whose responsibility it is to traffic in ideas. On the other hand is the ability of those ideas to fill in those gaps, shed new light, and offer new clues with or beyond which those events, facts, or processes start to become clear, follow a particular course, and manifest themselves in the occultist and, perhaps, least comprehensible and always most problematic ways for the psychology of

knowledge, as well as for the most concrete policies and initiatives. Finally, the success of these is guaranteed by something much more important from an intellectual point of view, their conceptual ability to draw to themselves the diverse angles from which the issue is studied—a paradigm.

The admixture of these and other reasons turns these ideas into any given place’s intellectual vogue. They are always aided by the self-interest of a state’s or some other corporation’s patronage. This sort of intellectual trend can be both negative and positive. In the first place, there will be people who follow it blindly, believing that one of the issue’s cruxes has been identified, and that the proper focus for understanding it all has been determined. In the second place, those who believe the opposite can prejudicially criticize the trend. Those who concern themselves with analyzing these trends may find this interesting, but it is certainly not intellectually innovative.

The trend regarding ideas begins with the inevitable absence of chronological perspective through which to analyze them. For this reason, among others, seminal ideas dealing with knowledge hardly ever start as trends. More likely, they begin as intellectual scandals. A case in point, for example, is when Clyde Kluckhohn’s *Mirror for Man* was published, and cultural anthropology was born, during the first quarter of the twentieth century. This book became a reference for

all scholars, until U.S. sociologist Talcott Parsons burst onto the scene and rigorously questioned the cultural concept the author espoused. Yet, one must read Kluckhohn to understand the place of anthropology in the science of man, and possibly to understand other cultures, too.

I cannot confirm that it was Kluckhohn's intention to become required reading, but what is true is that with his book *Desafios de la problemática racial en Cuba*, Esteban Morales is trying to do something more than just ideologically or politically analyze, write about, or debate the issue. What does he tell us in the book's introduction? "Based on the research completed to write this, the book presents the race issue as it was in the early years of the twenty-first century. Its fundamental objective is to design a theoretical and pedagogical model by which to understand the topic, and contribute to future research."¹

Thus, Morales presents us with both an epistemology and a paradigm: new possibilities for studying the race problem and a new point of departure for the future. The challenge in *Desafios* is pretentious but interesting, as is the problem it presents. Upon proposing to us his "theoretical and methodological model for understanding the topic," Morales is saying that the intellectual dimensions of the race issue have not yet been understood. This affirmation begs a specific response, an essay that first reviews all that has been written inside and outside of Cuba on the subject of his book. This matter is urgent, and not only just to put his declarations in perspective.

In a less obvious way, his view tries to make us accept that there has been a lack of theory surrounding the subject, which if true is very serious indeed, since if one considers the following marine metaphor, it

would mean we were lost at sea in total ignorance. A lack of theory in Cuba with which to understand the mentality of Vikings is no more than a problem of lacking access to global, academic information, which is so very limiting to us. But a lack of theory with which to comprehend our country's race problem is quite concerning, because that would be like saying that we simply don't know ourselves, and I understand I could be stating the obvious.

Is there truly an absence of theory? I cannot rigorously answer this question, but I am inclined to uphold it, not by inference but deduction. In this sense, the scarceness of theory in Cuba describes the situation of most of the humanities. Thus, if we accept the conclusion that we have lacked a theory with which to understand the race issue, then what is the basis upon which Morales' will pave the way for "later research"?

If we set aside the book's political limits and designs, which serve to defend its so-called revolutionary view of the race issue, and is a very legitimate political goal that I'm not interested in debating in this article, nor would question that, *Desafios de la problemática racial en Cuba*, with its emphasis on classes, materialism, modes of production, structure and superstructure, objective and subjective conditions, social and economic inequalities, and emancipation theory, departs from Marxist theory. It opens up new avenues of analysis for a subject like the race issue, and Morales endorses other perspectives that seem to be subordinate to his basic scheme.

This is not a good beginning. Independent of the fact that Karl Marx practiced this perverse brand of self-denying racism involving self-hatred, as in Jews renouncing Jews, and disdaining racial "others." One can see an example of this latter form of rejection in

the case of eastern Cuban Paul Lafargue and his son-in-law. Marxism was possible precisely because it was successful as a positive way with which to erase others. Anyone who ventures to read the *Communist Manifesto*, a truly well written pamphlet, can well understand how Marx considered capitalism to be positive exactly because it fulfilled the historic mission of erasing from the map Eastern “backwardness” (having nothing to do with eastern Cuba). This meant a denial of all cultural specificity, which is precisely at the crux of all race-related problems, and the source from which racism derives. This derivation is inevitable in Marxism because of its universal pretensions.

Yet, a focus on the race problem is productive **only** when it is anthropological, not classist. Thus, Marxism is no good for explaining this problem because it reduces its complexities to simplifications while simultaneously going from the simple to the complex. This is well illustrated in the structure of *Das Capital*. According to anthropologist Gilbert Ryle, this scientific work par excellence by Marx abounds with what he calls ‘dense description,’ explaining the complexity of cultural life via complexity itself.

The intricacies of Marxist processes contradict the intricacies of anthropology. Obviously, the former operate on universalizing principles, while anthropology gains in popularity through ideas like “Not on Easter Island.” Marxism explains that inequalities derive from one’s place in a determined society’s property structure, which accordingly explains racial inequality. Anthropology, on the other hand, does not explain the caste system in India by attributing it to its property system, in which case capitalism could not be blamed for Indian racism but rather for a more pluri-dimensional perspective related to certain religious principles. Thus,

for anthropology, inequality stems from difference (two distinct categories). Marxism, on the one hand, is eschatological (ending one life and beginning another); teleological (life governed in only one way) and orthogenetic (life governed in a proper way). Anthropology, on the other, does not concede life a beginning or end of anything, nor does it in any way direct it towards a particular future. In fact, “future” and “anthropology” are opposites.

Marxism is capable of others things that anthropology cannot do, like attributing a result to a cause no matter where it presents itself, with no regard for cultural specificity. This explains why Marxists became more frustrated than Christian missionaries in eighteenth-century Africa, when they discovered a culture of difference. The conceptual implication of this is not negligible for analyzing any racial topic: if Marxism uses universalizing criteria to make generalizations (which is still astonishing, if one considers Cuban feudalism), anthropology is successful only if it fulfills two of cultural theory’s conditions: to work with clinical interference, that is, to generalize in the context of each and every case, and to not be predictive. These are two conditions that no serious Marxist could take seriously. Lastly, although not last in the list of differences, Marxism is automatically historicist. It studies the conditions of change for change’s sake, and sees improvement in it, that is, a dialectics of the past for the future through the present. In no way does this have anything to do with anthropology. It examines the permanence of change, the incorporation of the past into the present, stability or fixedness, structures that are resistant through time, and how the past creeps into a present we keep from fooling us when it sells the best image of itself, if we properly inter-

pret the language of symbols. The difference is fundamental. Anthropology is possible because it sees human actions as symbolic actions. Yet, to a certain extent, Marxism does, too. British Marxist historian Eric Hobsbawm's expression in reference to the French Revolution, "nothing is more important that the fall of symbols in an age of revolutions," is famous. Yet, whereas in this symbolic action Marxists see the death of the past, anthropologists see its reproduction. One sees the passing of history while the other a reiteration of a mental norm. Viewed retrospectively, anthropologists have more theoretical-analytical training than historians, even without denying that history changes things. In its tendency for global leveling, Marxism encounters the problem of racism, among others, which is an anthropological problem, and lacks the proper tools with which to explain it or resolve the issues it presents.

In fact, when Marxism and anthropology try to work together, the result is a combination of strange and perverse effects: a cultural socialism that combines the universality of the former with the specificities of the second, to legitimate "African and Asian socialisms," "Cuban socialism," and others, which in practice is actually a universal manipulation of localisms, and produces an adaptation that reinforces itself not through what it takes from the local but rather from what it erases and suppresses of it. This is a source of strange and paradoxical contortions that occur when anthropology is identified with the old socialist orthodoxy. To propose an "backwards emancipation," is to petrify the very past that classic socialism tries and believes it necessary to overcome, in order to "free" man from "backwardness" and atavisms.

But, isn't Marxism a sort of anthropology? No. It is not. Marxism is the expression of a particular anthropological view that like Christianity, and particularly Catholicism, simply says that the other forms of anthropology are destined to disappear. To achieve this, it labors incessantly to try and indoctrinate people with that particular view, a position that was set forth by several important anthropological pioneers. The issue of "other customs, other beasts," without which there would be no productive cultural studies today, definitively replaced the Enlightenment's view, and that of the classic anthropology of Malinowski, Herskovits, and the rest, who saw only an unchanging and, finally, invariable human nature of which man was just one specific kind, and established the human science of typology. Marxism is a specific and virulent instance of this pre-internet, nineteenth-century view. A scholar like Maurice Godelier tried to awaken to Marxism after his long dogmatic slumber in anthropological studies with his interesting book, *Horizontes, trayectos marxistas en antropología* [Horizons: Marxist Inroads in Anthropology], in which he tried to contest psychologism, psycholinguistics, and functionalism, but lost sight of the important advance that came with symbolism and structural linguistics. Notwithstanding, the single most unique feature of his book stemmed from his successful connection of history and anthropology.

Aside from Godelier, in talking about anthropology, honest Marxists need to cite cultural anthropologists like Ernesto Cassirer or Kenneth Burke. Or do what prominent British Marxist Robert Murphy did when he read a text like Clifford Geertz's *Agricultural Involution* (which we should read in Cuba, for other reasons), and characterized it as "one of the decade's most bril-



The real truth

liant essays on cultural change”²² (in 1963), and finally stated he saw it “as one of the most eloquent condemnations of colonialism available anywhere.”²³ Of course, Geertz was no Marxist.

Naturally, the race problem is also a problem of economic and property structure. An accurate anthropological perspective on this cannot give the problem short shrift, but if anthropology sees human behavior as symbolic actions, it has to overcome the compartmentalized quagmires of idealism, positivism, functionalism, mentalism, conductism, materialism, and all the other –isms upon which Marxism bases its intellectual approaches and debates.

How can we find a new methodological approach to the race problem, and the racism that derives from it, without looking at the semiotics of almost anything—a rite of passage, a romantic novel, a revolutionary ideology, or a landscape? We must read *Myth*,

Symbol, and Culture, also by Geertz. Nor should we disdain the Mexican anthropology of Roger Bartra and, above all, read David Schneider, Marshall Sahlins (United States); Victor Turner or Mary Douglas (England); Ralph Lipton, the most known among us; Dan Sperber and Michel Izard (France), or the best known of all, Levi-Strauss. This is without mentioning African anthropological production, with which I am unfamiliar but without which we will ever understand part of our own worldview, or other productions with which we are now becoming familiar. Of course, we will not advance much theoretically in our study of Cuba’s race problems, which are also cultural problems, without the conclusions of semiologists and scholars of symbols (with their study of the interaction of signs [symbols]), or without cognitive anthropologists and emic analyses. These force us to put ourselves in the place of “others.” Thus, an approach via anthropology will

shed better light on our racial processes, which have been studied by great historians who nonetheless seem to suffer from a lack of serious theoretical progress. What is interesting is that the best of Cuban anthropology has more to do with a sociological view of poverty than with the cultural study of groups. For example, with cultural anthropology we could understand why discrimination in Cuba, a *machista* country, has traditionally been more directed against blacks than women. I absolutely know I have to prove this but I also see an explanation in today's strong Spanish-inspired perspective, which ever more forcefully reproduces *criollo* culture's norms more than those we conventionally call but never have to prove as Cuban culture. We would also be able to find a better explanation for why economic inequalities are concomitant with racial differences. Unlike Estaban Morales, I believe that in historical terms the precarious economic situation of blacks in Cuba has more to do with a racist distribution of symbolic power than with inequalities created by the injustice of a capitalist economic structure. The same is true with so-called Cuban socialism.

In reviewing a bit of our own historical process, we realize that most Spaniards came to Cuba to conquer and dogmatize, and not to work. Their even present-day, Catholic-inspired disdain for certain kinds of work facilitated the growth of a black, urban middle class as early as the beginning of the nineteenth century. When José Antonio Saco writes his book about idleness he is primarily referring to the sons of *criollo* Spaniards, not blacks or mulattoes. This middle class recreates itself over and over again, and becomes particularly ensconced, till 1959, in Cárdenas, Havana, Santiago de Cuba, and Guantánamo, when this group begins to dwindle as a class. Turning their backs on

physical labor, Cuba's *criollos* became known throughout history as being associated with commerce, war, and bureaucracy. It is no mere coincidence that the working class constitutes only 37% of the workers in Cuba, most of them black; or that none of the members of the CTC (Cuban Federation of Workers) are active workers, and are mostly white, or that their numbers in the ruling class increase more than those of the productive one.

What this means is that we must firmly and forcefully discuss the black and mulatto middle class at two distant, historic moments in time. From where, then, do the economic disparities between blacks and whites in Cuba come? I think it is due to the symbolic distribution of cultural power, which facilitated a sweeping away of the first middle class; then there was the repression caused by the La Escalera uprising at the beginning of the nineteenth century; and, then again, after the 1959 revolution. In any of these cases, this means that poverty and precariousness are not created by a capitalistic reproduction of inequality, but rather by something much more terrible and complex: the distribution and cultural reproduction of difference.

In this sense, when at the beginning of his book Estaban Morales tells us that "race or skin color, and class structure, go hand in hand in Cuba's history,"⁴ he is making an undeniably precise ethnographic observation, but also quickly losing sight of a need for the kind of *dense description* that the phenomenon requires, which would totally relativize his Marxist diagnosis.

Moreover, the same would be true of his other hasty conclusions. "So-called whites have always been identified with wealth, economic control, privilege, the dominant culture, and power. For their part, blacks and *mestizos* have been identified with poverty,

neglect, as well as an absence of all privilege, subjugated cultures, discrimination, and powerlessness.”⁵

Further on, it is true that the author mentions interesting extremes that contradict some his own conclusions:

- “Very little is known about those blacks and *mestizos* who occupied many jobs, positions, and settled in Havana en masse.”⁶
- “Very little is known about what became of that middle class that was so seriously affected by anti-abolitionist repression.”⁷

Instead, he states something much more interesting concerning an appropriately anthropological approach to the subject: “The cultures that came from Africa are

almost exclusively present under the categories of religion and folklore in most bibliographies, and hardly ever under those of philosophy, worldview, or thought,”⁸ which would seem to point to better prospects for future studies of the subject.

My previous article in *ISLAS*, titled “Article 5,” is an exploration of what others have thought about the creation of civic and political space, which is precisely why I believe that those *false universals* of which A.L. Kroeber spoke pit anthropology against Marxism. This does not offer us the most suitable approach for confronting our race problem in the twenty-first century.

Notes:

1. Morales Domínguez, Esteban. *Desafíos de la problemática racial en Cuba* (La Habana: Editorial La Fuente Viva, 2007): 27.
2. Geertz, Clifford. *La Interpretación de las culturas* (Barcelona: Gedisa Editorial, 2003): 18.
3. *Ibid.*
4. Morales Domínguez, Esteban. *Op. Cit.* 10.
5. *Ibid.*, 11.
6. *Ibid.*, 14.
7. *Ibid.*
8. *Ibid.*