

# Racism or an Accumulation of Disadvantages?

Moisés Leonardo Rodríguez  
Professor and civic activist  
Havana, Cuba



*Cuban university students*

*“Races, languages, history, religions, they are all on and off trappings, under which surges, enveloping and dominating them, essential and invariable human nature.”*

José Martí<sup>1</sup>

There are abundant academic studies, popular debates, and cultural projects by individuals, groups, and institutions focused on achieving equality for population groups like homosexuals, women, the poor,

blacks, and others whose social impact is not always measurable.

In the case of race, and particularly blacks, people’s focus on these projects range from those that consider them victims, to those that hold them responsible for the racism in which they feel trapped.

On the other hand, a simple look at Cuban society reveals the multicolored composition of a large part of Cuban families (which explains the popular question ‘so, where is your grandmother?’). It is chock full of many interracial couples and marriages, many friendships between people of all colors, and

good relations between neighbors and workers, and among Cubans everywhere. This is the norm.

Although our culture is marked by the use of expressions that associate skin color, particularly blackness, with bad attitudes and other manifestations and behaviors that could be identified as discriminatory, it would seem that the Cuban race issue is more centered on economic and cultural disadvantage than the sort of racist attitude that is usually associated with the term. Visions of blackness go with bad attitudes, and other displays and behaviors that can be seen as discriminatory.

Yet, not only has the United States Ku Klux Klan never been established in Cuba but, additionally, if the pre-1959, separate black and white societies were at all alike in any of their endeavors, it was in their concern for good manners, respectful interpersonal relations, and a refinement of the spirit.

The rise to power of the group that still wields it—after 53 years—swept the subject of racism under the rug as a way to swell its list of “accomplishments,” which serves only to show off to those abroad, and delight back room blind men and traitors who learn to live with the mounting failures, including that of equal opportunity for all races. Beyond the theoretical debate, which centers itself on the first two steps in the most universal method for seeing-judging-acting, it seems that the issue needs to be dealt with forthwith, both empirically, as regards social praxis, and at the level of acting. Of this Martí once wrote: “Redemption has been theoretical and formal: it must also be effective and essential.”<sup>2</sup>

The crisis of the last twenty years, caused, maintained, and exacerbated by misguided official policies, is complicated by the increasing difference in people’s incomes and accumulation of wealth, and the consequences

of this for the individual, familial, and cultural development of blacks. In a focus using the SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats) matrix, these should be considered weaknesses that can be converted into strengths, and applicable to all human endeavors. Beyond the current legal framework in place, which impedes or prevents independent, decentralized, and area-specific characteristics of each zone, group, and other differentiating possibilities, is one of the principles to consider in any strategy to deconstruct the conditioning differences that still exist as a result of real or apparent racism.

Recalling historical memory only to justify laments, lay blame, laud defenders, and demonize adversaries or vent accumulated resentment, contributes to perpetuating, *perpetuum mobile*, the unwanted spiral from which one can escape only by undertaking practical actions—complementing theoretical efforts for actions to change reality—and progressively decreasing the accumulated disadvantages beyond which one must survive what has already been seen and judged.

A tactic yet to be employed is to use distance education as a way to open doors to those for whom official educational institutions close them, not only due to their skin color, but also because of how far away they live, their lack of resources, and other limitations that abound among the eternally marginalized—be they white or black. Aid in the form of technical training, start-up funds, and advising for those who want to be self-employed and small business owners could increase the number of black business owners, and subsequently stimulate the growth of that sort of culture among people of our race.

Little by little, or better yet, case by case, we can begin to achieve the economic positioning of an increasing number of blacks; it can

serve as a place from which to eventually reach our much desired and deserved condition as members of the human family. Cuban law does not block access to universities for blacks, nor does it keep them from obtaining licenses for self-employment or small businesses. But it is the case that they already start out with objective disadvantages, which contributes to closing this vicious circle.

Even if there are careers to which blacks don't have access—like international relations, foreign commerce, and others reserved for the descendants of those in power (almost all whites), those unconditionally faithful to them (generally whites, and one or another light-skinned mulatto)—the rest of the population has no access to them either. Thus, perhaps, we should speak of a leveling of inequality.

It is because of this 'leveling' that the best opportunities remain beyond our reach, and we only shine when we're engaged in activities that require us to use our innate talents, e.g., music and sports. The doors to other careers are closed to us, but will we be ready when they open? The Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. answered this question when he spoke to young students in his country: "You do not have to insist on the importance of these years of study. You should realize that many doors that were not open for your parents are being opened for you. Your great responsibility consists of being prepared to enter those doors."<sup>3</sup>

UNESCO's concept of human development, with its strategy for ongoing education, supports our proposal to take advantage of the second chances that distance education offers, as well as of competition in the free market, both as alternatives to the 'doors' that the state offers for education and employment, as well as the limits that have been set for members of unfavored groups like blacks.

Contributions to education for the purpose of improving people's advantages could be relevant in an effort to progressively diminish the accumulated disadvantages, and be important for changing a sad and true reality in which blacks are a minority, or are absent from among the best paid positions, public jobs, or other areas of the higher levels of the pyramid that represents wealth distribution and social recognition.

The preceding is a precondition for our being able to someday proportionately represent our own people in prisons, as well as universities, highly skilled positions and less intellectually rigorous jobs, in Miramar and Palenque, in the dips and highpoints of all parts of our life as a nation—and not disproportionately, as is the case now.

This path will develop fully when decency, honesty, knowledge, initiative and personal effort, civic virtue and hard work, as well as other internationally validated values are the tools with which to equitably accumulate wealth, achieve social recognition and other elements that help combine individual and societal interests. Additionally, it will be a slow but steady process to replace those values that are officially recognized with acknowledgment, social and economic ascent. What we have now is a life according to socialist values, which in reality denies universal ones and we have the dissolution of individuals into a mass that government leaders tend to call "the people"—an imprecise term.

A transition to democracy, free market, and Rule of Law that must inevitably occur will leave intact in those new conditions disadvantages, unless we don't immediately create a situation in which blacks can enjoy equal competitive and comparative rights with their nationals and even foreigners living in Cuba, part of the challenge of turning around our

national disaster by means of the new actions of Cuban individuals. This will involve a re-education in the value of decency, honesty, civic virtues, teaching professions and the arts, and creating jobs that require personal effort and initiative—despite the fact the current environment not only disapproves of this, but also blocks it. The future socialization of our society will take the place of the marginalizing kind that equally created the current situation between blacks and whites.

Another necessary principle to follow is to ensure the sanctity of equality. This is not about making blacks equal to whites. The essential issue is to raise the cultural level of all Cubans without forgetting that our culture is like an *ajiaco*. The Apostle was quite right when he wrote that “social equality was not possible without cultural equality.”<sup>4</sup>

Blacks and whites should have access to the ballet schools, as well to African dances. Both black and white young people should do hip-hop, and they should both be able to sing classical opera. The best of them should be promoted under equal circumstances. Likes and preferences should be a matter of personal choice, just as when people find a partner or choose friends.

Institutionally recognized and supervised equal rights are only one factor. For people to take advantage of them, they must have been equally educated, and be motivated by interests, skills, and a vocation created by dint of the personal desires, initiative, and efforts of each and every person—without distinction. This is the essence of social justice.

Martí warned us by writing: “Anything that divides men, anything that distinguishes, separates or corners them is a sin against humanity.”<sup>5</sup> Our current society needs to heal many of the diseases from which it suffers. The road to healing requires a “triumphant love

formula,”<sup>6</sup> which can only happen in a society in which there are interpersonal relations that are not divided in any way according to knowledge, power, or possession, nor by other false differentiators like skin color, institutional membership, religious beliefs, or any other preferences.

Love as an essential component of the nation’s healing formula is another principle that must guide our efforts to eliminate the deficiencies in our culture and social practices that separate, divide, or corner this or that group of Cubans. For the love of those who “love and build” to shape projects that support the cultural improvement and preparation of blacks, so they can begin down the path to diminishing their accumulated disadvantages, is a challenge. It will be hard for the Cuban slogan “With all, and for the good of all” not to keep being oft repeated but little respected.<sup>8</sup>

**Notes:**

- 1- Martí, José. *Obras Completas X*. (La Habana: Editorial de Ciencias Sociales, 1975): 475.
- 2- *Ibid*, VII, 230.
- 3- Rousell, Vincent. *Contra todas las exclusiones*. [N.P: N.D]: 14.
- 4- Martí José. *Ibid*, III, 28.
- 5- *Ibid*, IX, 161.
- 6- *Ibid*, IV, 279.
- 7- *Ibid*, IV, 176.
- 8- *Ibid*, IV, 279.