



From half-truths to negative action: Racial relations and the Structure of Power in Cuba

Omar López Montenegro

Writer and poet

One of the most important problems we face when we decide to approach this topic is objectivity. I say this because every time we try to discuss the racial issue a whole list of stereotypes begin to come up. These are stereotypes that respond only and exclusively to personal experiences, traditional perceptions and political positions related to the racial topic. Therefore I think it is imperative to cut to the chase, partly due to my interest in finding appropriate solutions to the problem, and also because I do not want to test the patience of my readers.

In the Cuban situation, the racial issue has always been dealt with through two basic stereotypes. On one hand, certain sectors of the Cuban exile community have disseminated the image that in pre-Castro's Cuba there was racial harmony. On the other hand we have the Cuban propaganda that affirms that before 1959 Blacks in Cuba were victims of the cruelest of racial exploitations. The first version is the one I have chosen to call "a half-truth" because it reflects a version partly based on reality but that it does not totally correspond to it. The second version, the Cuban government propaganda, is what I call

“negative action” because it is the product of a political ideology designed by the government to control Black Cubans. Each of these two stereotypes has its own origins and motivations which we will try to explain in the shortest way possible.

In order to obtain an ample and complete understanding of interracial relations in Cuba today and how these have been affected by 40 years of communism, it is necessary to go back to the origins of Cuban nationhood, to the beginning of Cuba as a nation in the eyes of the world. The starting point, the struggle for independence from Spanish colonialism, is of particular importance because of its peculiar characteristics. The leaders of the Cuban Independence were absolutely unanimous with regard to the abolition of slavery. Martí, Gomez, Agramonte and Cespedes, just to name a few, were fervent speakers against slavery and Cuba as a nation was born free of it. It is also important to highlight that two of the most important men who built the Cuban independence movement were Black: Antonio Maceo and Juan Gualberto Gomez. The first one was a soldier, and the second one a writer, an intellectual. The word “mambi”, general term applied to all the members of the Independence Army regardless of rank, is the same word used in an African dialect to mean a slave that breaks his chains and flees to the hills.

Another significant fact of this period is that Carlos Manuel de Cespedes, the Father of the Country, gathered his slaves and gave them freedom before taking up arms against the Spanish Crown. In his first revolutionary decree Carlos Manuel established that “a free Cuba is incompatible with a Cuba with slaves”. Article 14 of the Constitution prepared in Guaimaro by the Revolutionary Republic established that “all inhabitants in the island [were] completely free”. On the other hand, the War of Independence of the Thirteen Colonies of North America was led by Whites only and in the end it gave birth to the United States where slavery remained unchallenged. The Cuban Independence War had ample Black participation. Blacks saw their own individual freedom intimately tied to the independence of the island.

In 1902, once Cuba was independent and a Republic, the relationship between the two races did not reach equal levels, but it never reached a state of confrontation. As early as in 1909 -

seven years after the Republic had been instituted — Martin Morua Delgado was elected president of the Senate. In 1904 Generoso Campos Marquetti was elected Member of the Representative Chamber, followed by his brother, Francisco, in 1905. If we compare this situation with the one in the United States, we can appreciate that in 1876, one hundred years after the Independence of the Thirteen Colonies, no Black American had occupied a seat in any legislative branch of the nation. During the 57 Republican years prior to Fidel Castro, twenty five Black Cubans became members of the legislative branches, to mention only those who were elected Councilmen, Senators, or State Governors.

In Cuba there were no laws forbidding Black access to positions of power or to public positions, nor were there ever segregated public bathrooms. Only private clubs restricted access to Blacks. There were neighborhoods for the poor, but there were none for-Blacks-only. Therefore it is impossible to speak of racial antagonism in the island. The struggle for equality was not aimed at passing laws forbidding segregation, because that simply did not exist. The Constitution of 1940 in his Article 20 established that “It is illegal and punishable any form of discrimination based on sex, race, color or class and any other offense to human dignity”.

The growth of the Black population was one of the factors that most influenced Cuban society. The 1907 census revealed a half million Blacks, by 1953 there were more than a million and a half. According to *The Black Diaspora*, published in 1995 by the South African sociologist Richard Segal, the Cuban population was 55% Black, 30% White and 15% mulattoes. For Jean Ziegler, a Swiss sociologist cited by Segal, “there is a consensus among foreign specialists that Afro-Cubans exceed 65% of the population”. The Cuban government data is not trustworthy. There is a well founded suspicion that they have been altered or manipulated by political interests. However, in spite of some discrepancies, there is a true consensus about the current inhabitants: Blacks or mulattoes constitute the majority of today’s Cuban population.

It can be said that the three institutions that most effectively preserve Cuban culture and identity are religion, the family and language, as commented in 1992 by Robert L. Steinback,

writer for The Miami Herald. None of these institutions were destroyed in the process of creating a Cuban nationhood. They melted to give rise to a new social organism: the Cuban individual. In Cuba everyone speaks the same language. Linguistic jargons do not pertain to a particular racial group. They are all assimilated and used indiscriminately, without distinction. Even those that originated in African languages are part of the common speech among White Cubans. Words such as "aché" or "nagüe" from the Yoruba, to cite a couple of examples, are used by all Cubans regardless of the color of their skin.

With regard to religion the mixture goes even deeper. The religious syncretism that allowed the fusion between the African deities and the Catholic ones brought about the indiscriminate participation of Blacks and Whites in those religious practices since they all identified with the same deities. Whites are accepted in Afro-Cuban rituals without any reservation. So much so, that the 'bible' for practitioners and for those who study those religions is *El Monte*, a book written by a White Cuban, Lydia Cabrera. No Black Cuban has ever accused her of swindling or misappropriating the Black cultural patrimony, in spite of the fact that she dared bring to light the existence of the Abakua secret society, a fraternity commonly associated with bloody rituals. It should then be noted that when *El Monte* was being sold at the 1991 Book Fair Cubans waited in line more than 10 hours. In the black market the book was being sold for the incredible sum of one hundred pesos or more. For another historian, Fernando Ortiz, recognized as an expert on Black Cubans and their religious cults in Cuba, "Without Blacks, there would not be a Cuba. Therefore I could not ignore them".

In the artistic realm we can observe the same phenomenon. The first authentically national work of art, a decisive step toward the creation of a national identity, is no more no less than Cecilia Valdez, a novel where racial mixture is the unifying element and its thesis. This shows that Cuban national art is the product of racial mixture. In cultural terms, in Cuba there are no separate identities for Blacks, mulattoes or Whites. Cuban music, the so-called son, salsa, or whatever people choose to call it, is a direct result of the blend between European and African rhythms. The African and Spanish her-

itages are today part of the folkloric element and the rumba, the son and the bolero are considered cultural patrimony available equally to all. Since there are no pure races, racial pride has been replaced in Cuba by cultural pride, giving birth to an identity that is neither Black nor White, but Cuban.

All this leads us to a vision of Cuba that, if not a perfect interracial harmony, at least lacking in racial antagonisms. But this does not mean that what can be called "racial harmony" really existed. My question at this point is: Where does it exist? In Cuba there was a racial problem before Castro's Revolution, although it never reached the level of confrontation we saw in the United States. To pretend that this problem was not present is what I call "a half-truth". You only have to read the Social Calendar pages of *El Nuevo Herald* where Blacks appear so sporadically that one could forget they exist. However, from that to talking about rampant racism before 1959 is a big step.

However, this is in fact the theory employed by the Cuban regime to create an interracial gap and to politically manipulate the interracial problem; this is what we have called "negative action". Without a coherent social program, Castro has maximized the racial discrimination problem in order to feign that at least Blacks have been redeemed and have been given back their dignity. The big paradox of this racial propaganda is that it has brought into evidence the racist character of the regime. This can be analyzed based on the communist power structure. Since Cuba is a closed society, nobody has access to government positions on his own merits or through free election; only by appointment from the highest government authority. The absence of Black Cubans in the highest levels of government is evidence that there is no place for Blacks in them. Fidel Castro finally decided to deal with this topic in one of his speeches after receiving overwhelming criticism from overseas and secret reports from the Ministry of the Interior about the alarming rate of crime among the Black population, the increasing rate of drop out among Black children, and other social indicators. In that speech Castro ended up ordering the increase of Blacks in the Communist Party.

In that speech two premises became self-evident. In the first place, the Communist Party's racist essence became obvious. As an organization, the Party had closed its doors to the same

citizens that should have been its majority because of all the suffering they had previously endured. From this we can arrive at two conclusions: or the Communist Party restricted Black access, as was later admitted by the General Secretary, or, on the other hand, most Black Cubans were not interested in joining the Party, which would then demonstrate that the Party did not meet their needs. Either way, one follows the other and together they result in a true picture of reality in the island.

The second premise confirmed what we all know to be true: if Castro needed to do a speech for Blacks to be admitted into the Party then it was obvious that his power was due to a political game, and not to the natural leadership selection that should have existed in a popular democracy. This places racial equality subject to the whims and needs of the dictator. For this reason we observe that today's economic, social and moral crisis is shaking the very foundation of the dictatorship. The racial card is being used by the official propaganda to increase the fear among the Black population of a hypothetical lack of opportunity in a capitalist system due to racism.

Another one of the ghosts used by the government is that of an imaginary outbreak of racial violence should the current government tumble down. This theory, based on what took place in old Yugoslavia, lacks every type of historical foundation. Cuba, as opposed to those countries, does not have a history of racial violence. The 1912 revolt contemptuously cited outside Cuba as "The little war of 1912", failed for many reasons. One of them, the idea of a Black political party lacked Black support. The initiative to form a Black-only political group had been championed by Estenoz who was later accused of racism by Black leaders, including by Martin Morua Delgado, the Leader of the Senate. In Cuba there is no history of lynching, acts of vandalism due to racism nor organizations that proclaim the sovereignty of the White race. Violence inside the island is more a political act than a racial one. Since there is no violence of Whites against Blacks, there has never been a need for Black retaliation.

Lets then take a look at the sociological aspects of the issue. With all respect toward those multiple opinions outside Cuba so concerned with the racial problem in the island, the racial issue is not among the priorities among political dissidents, opposers or sympathizers of

a civil society, issue that is becoming increasingly important inside Cuba. Generally to get an opinion about the racial topic, it must be suggested by someone who lives overseas, otherwise all you hear is the ever-present preoccupation with delinquency, unequal access to the dollar (who has access and who does not), police repression—political or economic – prostitution and moral and material desolation. So, if we are to base our conclusions on what people say unprompted and not on what they have been asked, the racial problem is not relevant. The survey carried out in the central provinces by the delegation to the National Council for Civil Rights to measure how the Cuban youth thinks is a concrete example. According to the data obtained by this survey the racial topic does not register among the future concerns of those surveyed.

In summary, what we have is a population that does not spontaneously perceive the racial problem as one of its priorities in contrast to a government that needs to invent that lie in order to dominate. The Cuban government, by setting up race as one of the problems in Cuban society, is negatively influencing the very concept of nationhood and establishing separate categories for its citizens. This notion of a separate Black identity, absent from the national consciousness before the Revolution, is being promoted by the regime in order to debilitate its opposition and to reduce its capacity to become a cohesive force. As a result, if there isn't a favorable outcome in favor of democracy, Cuban society will be torn apart and it will go backwards. In his desire to manipulate the racial problem for his own convenience, Fidel Castro is producing a social regression which will eventually be more detrimental to Cuban Blacks than even the racism they could confront at the end of the current dictatorship.

It is here that both situations join hands, in Cuba and in the exile, for both are a product of vision of the past and of political positions that characterize those who project them. As long as the racial topic continues to be boxed into stereotypes, it can never be dealt with fairly. Until we approach this topic with a point of view capable of carrying us toward the future, no realistic and practical solution to the problem can be found, no matter what it might be. No race can be saved until we can be saved until we save all human beings.