

# Black and Red

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One of the first editions of the Soviet newspaper *Zhizn natsionalnostei* about problems of nationalities, already foresaw “the awakening of the nationalist passions among the dark tribes of Sudan, South America and South Africa [after] the collapse of the colonial empires”.<sup>1</sup> Racism ever since remained treated as a consequence of capital in action and the belief was forged that racial problems could be solved with one Marxist-Leninist stroke.

Shortly after his victory, Fidel Castro delivered his historic declaration about the black man’s rights in Cuba<sup>2</sup>, but he immediately had to appear on television and quiet the priority hostile rumor about interracial marriages: “the Revolution was not going to tell anybody with whom he must dance”. While socialist dirt was poured and revolutionary tamping was applied to the racial problem inside the Island, the foreign projection clung on to the link with capitalism. One of the programmed documents of the Cuban Revolution (*Segunda Declaración de La*

*Habana*, 1962) brandished racism like the tip of a lance against the “neo-colonialist” Alliance for Progress, which Washington had just designed for Latin America. “How are they to believe that this imperialism, in its benefits, in its alliances (unless they are to lynch them and exploit them like slaves) these ignored ethnic nuclei, (...) those 107 millions of men and women of our America, marrow of labor in cities and countryside, whose dark skin (black, mulatto, cross-bred, half-breed, Indian) inspires the new colonizers?”.<sup>3</sup>

The militant publicity did not cease to inflame the racial sensitivities of “the brothers to the North [who] could not ride the same vehicles as their white fellow countrymen, attend the same schools, or die in the same hospitals”. During his intervention in the conference of the Organization of American States (Punta del Este, August, 1961), Che Guevara presented racial inequality as a cardinal justification for rebellion in Latin America, but he proposed, not only its eradication as a primary goal of the revolutionary move-

ment, but also its link with the discrimination of North American blacks.

One of these, John Clytus, would travel to Cuba around 1964. Since he had not been invited, the reception was far from warm, but in the end he managed to work as an English professor in the Ministry of Foreign Trade (MINCEX) and as a translator in the newspaper *Granma*. He left the Island in 1967 and he didn't waste any time in publishing his experiences in his book *Black Man in Red Cuba*.

Clytus found that "not only were the minister and vice-minister [of MINCEX] white, but so were all the supervisors in all the departments. I did not need much time to discover that, in each one of the 17 or more ministries in the country, the two main posts were occupied by whites."<sup>4</sup> He likewise realized that *Granma* and the rest of the Cuban newspapers gave preference to articles about racial unrest in the U.S., but they begrudged any reference to feelings of independent black identity within Cuba.

The nuances among Cubans observed by Clytus coincide with Soviet Africanologist I.I. Pothekin's criticisms against Senegalese mandataray Leopold Sanghor's "Negrist" notions and the current of Pan-Africanist thought.<sup>5</sup> Clytus would explain his return to the States because he could at least publicly protest against racial discrimination and openly defend the black nationalist positions: "Communism, with its benevolent method of putting an end to the racial problem condensing all the races in a single big and happy human race, definitely brought the curtain down on black conscience."

A mulatto female journalist, Elizabeth Shuterland, would perceive the same racial signs in the Cuban ruling élite which alarmed Clytus. She visited the Island when he was returning (1967) and she was able to interview Cubans from all social sectors. Her report on the racial question in Cuba, *The Youngest Revolution*, includes even the arrogant testimony that "the Cuban revolution is the only one worth observing at this moment, with the exception of China, and Cuba is even more interesting than China, because the people have more of a racial mix".<sup>6</sup>

Shuterland noticed how average people used deprecatory racial epithets in daily communication, how black faces were conspicuous in their absence from mass communication media and how people put down Negroid features or black cultural values as opposed to their white equivalents. Hence she refuted the presumption in vogue within the socialist circles, at least since Harry King had affirmed: "the Cuban racial problem has been solved".<sup>7</sup>

For Shuterland, "white supremacy, another old idea rooted in old Cuban society, is perhaps the most sensitive and confused subject of all that may arise today".<sup>8</sup> It could not be any less; many agreed with Gustavo Enrique Mustelier in that, in one century at the latest, "the black race will have disappeared from our milieu. It will be relegated to the legendary and the Negro will be spoken of as of a thing which was absent and extinguished".<sup>9</sup>

Castro's victory (1959) gave occasion for Fernando Ortiz's defining statement: "Cuba is obligated to work toward the eradication of racism in all its manifestations [and] this would be one of the most

plausible social reforms which the present revolutionary government can make with firmness and tact".<sup>10</sup> Toward 1967 Shuterland classified Cuba's most difficult and urgent problems "into three categories of human relations: class, race and sex, [which] seemed to pose most difficult and long-term challenges for the Revolution".<sup>11</sup> By then the Congreso Cultural (La Habana, 1968) finally recognized that "racism is not historically a product of modern imperialism, but an ideological remnant from the past".

In a letter to Cuban intellectual Walterio Carbonell, Carlos Moore admits that the black man advanced more in Castrist Cuba than in republican Cuba (1902-58), but in 1985 balancing ethnic representation (besides female and young) was again urged in the different levels of the state administration with the corresponding proportion in the population. At the closing of the Congreso Pedagogía 2003, Castro admitted that his revolution, "beyond the rights and guarantees reached for all citizens of any ethos and origin, has not accomplished the same success in the fight to eradicate the differences in the social and economic status of the black population of the country".

The friend as well as the foe of Castrism must unfaultily ask himself whether the "Cuban way" provides the solution to the racial problem or, instead, succumbs to one of the most pressing temptations of the political discourse of modern times: reduce several social matters to a single one (the socialist revolution) to give it a suitable reply and so imagine the solution to the rest.

An informal team of specialists carried out this singular sociological experiment (Habana Vieja, 1998): Two pairs of young males (one white and one black) with similar clothes and personal appearance would walk down Obispo street from the Plaza de Armas (next to the Castillo de la Fuerza) to the little Albear plaza (at Monserrate, by the Floridita restaurant). Here the incidents of the walk would be written down.

In spite of the experiment being repeated on different days of the week and at different times of the day, the results did not differ at all: while the white young men did not face major difficulties on the way, the black young men were often questioned by the police and forced, not only to identify themselves, but also to show what they were carrying in their backpacks and their briefcases, respectively.

#### NOTES AND BIBLIOGRAPHY

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