

Racism in Cuba: A Controversial Subject

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The topic of racism or racial prejudice in Cuba is one of the country's most complicated subjects during its present sociological situation. The socialist government resoundingly affirms that racial discrimination has been abolished, once and for always, through its implementation of a policy of racial equality.

Within the Cuban socialist legal system, racism, or more accurately, its manifestation as a discriminatory act, is considered a crime. Article 42 of the socialist state's supreme law

states: "Discrimination on the basis of race, skin color, gender, national origin, religious beliefs, or any other assault on human dignity is illegal and punishable by law."

On the other hand, Article 295 of the Penal Code, or Law 62, establishes a sentence of six months to two years of incarceration, or a fine of 200-500 Cuban pesos, or both, for anyone who discriminates against somebody; encourages discrimination; spreads discriminatory ideas based on the concept of racial superiority or hatred; commits violent

acts or urges anyone else to commit them against any race or group of people of another color or ethnic origin. The penalty, however, is very lenient, if one compares it to the one for the *sui generis* crime of “enemy propaganda,” which is punishable by up to eight years of prison, or the three years of incarceration one can get for the so-called “crime of contempt” of the president of the State Cabinet; of the president of the National Assembly; of the members of the State Cabinet and Ministers, or of the delegates of the National Assembly.

These legal provisions regarding the problem of racial or ethnic discrimination seem to constitute progress within the Cuban legal tradition. Even though the Republican Constitution of 1940 declared as punishable “any discrimination for reason of gender, race, color or class, and any other assault on human dignity,” according to its Article 20; it was not the case that the Civil Defense Code, in its penal law, reflected anything like what is currently stated in Article 295 of the contemporary Penal Code. Notwithstanding, in taking into account the current social reality, could anyone actually say that there is no evidence of racism, racial discrimination or racial prejudice in Cuba today?

The answer is actually quite complicated because two ethnic groups prevail in Cuba. One is European, the other is black which originated in Africa and became established in the country through the slave trade, which was kept up until the late nineteenth century. The coexistence of both racial groups was shaped by different time periods that indelibly marked each groups’ tolerance or rejection of the other. Yet, beginning with the period of the independence wars till now, Cuba was not characterized as a racist nation like the Deep South of the United States or segregated South Africa might have been.



After a coup deposed the government of Fulgencio Batista (a mulatto of humble origins who managed to become the leader of Cuba’s army and the country’s constitutionally elected president-turned-tyrant), the incoming government greatly manipulated the topic of racial discrimination to support its populist agenda and gain the unconditional support of Cuban blacks. This was done in order to better position itself before Cuba’s educated and economically privileged classes.

Forty years later, many black Cubans feel discriminated against. But when asked to accurately substantiate their claims of discrimination, all they can do is refer to extremely isolated incidents or offer very subjective criteria. Nevertheless, Cuba’s prison population is primarily black and there are fewer blacks serving in the Cuban Cabinet than there are African American representatives or senators in the U.S. Congress. There are also only a few black Cubans at any of the highest levels of government. They are scarce among the Secretaries General of the provincial governments of the country’s only party. There are many who make reference to this reality but this alone, is not irrefutable evidence of the existence of any official discrimination against blacks.

Racism is a cultural phenomenon: it is a part of popular thinking. Its subjective component is xenophobia, a rejection of all those who are not members of one’s own ethnic

group. This kind of black-on-white and white-on-black racism exists in Cuba. As a phenomenon, it has only recently reappeared in Cuba, perhaps reformulating itself and incorporating practices hitherto unknown during the pre-Revolutionary, Republican period.

By manipulating Cuban blacks, the government exaggerated the level of racism in the Republic and presented itself as the emancipator of the nation's blacks from all kinds of discrimination. This insistence on the subject of discrimination held whites as responsible for it, in the eyes of the black population: if blacks had suffered discrimination, the logical conclusion was that it had been the whites that had subjected them to it. This conflation of ideas caused blacks to mistrust whites and consider them old-style racists and enemies of all people of color.

This situation has generated tension between Cuba's two basic ethnic groups. It has also torn asunder the idea of creating a truly colorblind society. The Cuban black "liberated" by socialism has been used for the purpose of international propaganda; hence the palpable exclusion of non-blacks on national sports teams. The trademark "Caribbean mulatto woman" and black soccer and basketball players are much needed to continue to win over diehard African supporters of the regime in Havana.

There can be no roundabout answers to the question of whether or not there is racism in Cuba. It is also impossible not to address it. The answer is quite simple: yes, there is racism in Cuba. At the very least, there is evident ethno-phobia. The kind of racism that exists today in Cuba is very different from the kind there was prior to 1959, which could be seen almost exclusively in only certain social sectors and among select members of the middle and elite classes. Ethnophobia now can be seen as a reaction to an action, a double-edged sword

that can just as easily cut one or the other of the two groups. It is a silent but subtly friendly clash between two races. In general, blacks prefer to keep to themselves, thus isolating themselves from whites in shared social activities, parties, friendly gatherings, and when drinking socially. The same thing is happening among whites; each group sticking to its own, although not segregated to the degree that was the norm in a city like Atlanta in the 1950s. Cuban racism is no more than a very distinct form of racial prejudice that is explained away as simple acknowledgment of "difference."

Nevertheless, in the context of the privileges that foreigners enjoy in Cuba, both blacks and whites are equally ethnically discriminated against and positioned well below them. Both groups are denied equal access to the best hotels, beaches and swimming facilities, and prohibited from visiting places that have been designated for tourists only, such as Cayo Coco and Cayo Largo. This is a humiliating reality, one that both blacks and whites endure—the nation's entire population is being subjected to this sort of discrimination.

Cubans are a passionate, fervent and sometimes intolerant people. Yet, they are able to love themselves as people too. They can and do address one another as brothers and sisters, and are not easily swayed by fanaticism and hate. They represent a real mixture of races and cultures, and are able to embrace without regard to race or skin color. Some day, when they understand the nature of a really democratic society, racial prejudice will no longer have a place in Cuba. Free of hypocrisy and the caudillo tradition, Cuba will someday be a truly colorblind society.

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