

Economics: A Crossroads and Challenge for Cuba's African Descendents

Leonardo Calvo Cárdenas
Historian and Political Scientist
Cuban Socialist Democratic Current
General Director, Consenso Media Group
Havana, Cuba

The profound, general structural crisis that has for nearly two decades shaken the very roots of Cuban society has had a particularly negative effect on the lives and economic possibilities of the country's black population.

Historically, they have been excluded from the socioeconomic twists and turns of our development as a nation: as slaves subjected to the cruelest and most inhuman exploitation, they had to choose between the ignominious degradation of the slave barracoon and forced labor or the extremely risky life of palenques (maroon communities). As freemen and citizens, they saw their rights, desires and needs frustrated and ignored by the efforts of a powerful elite that forced them to be marginalized via a social fissure of their own invention that inflicted immeasurable harm on our nation's social structure.

Not even the costly and undeniable gains attained during the first half of the twentieth

century or the equality promoted from on high after the revolutionary triumph of 1959 managed to establish and consolidate the equality a society like ours' needs—the fullest expression of its complete and complex ethnic and racial diversity.

The last decade witnessed the collapse of the tenuous and artificial stability that for a number of years had supported generous and selfish commercial and economic subsidies in Cuba from the now defunct Soviet Union, which used that policy to also encourage impromptu volunteerism and military expansionism on the part of the island's highest leadership.

The real economic weaknesses and deficiencies revealed by this 'outing' of the Cuban economy exacerbated the disadvantages for a large part of the population that was always on the bottom and whose hopes and dreams were always just that—hopes and dreams. From the very beginning of the 'Special

Period'[the period of most intense economic crisis] of the 1990s, blacks and mestizos have seen themselves either far or excluded from any possibility of development and economic prosperity.

All of a sudden, land ownership or agricultural production became a highly promising and lucrative business. A huge decline in the importation of alimentary goods and the State's own lack of productivity and inefficiency (the State is the greatest landowner, monopolizing 85% of usable land) caused individual farmers—with their limited resources—to become the most productive and efficient sector of this important branch of the country's economy, despite the numerous restrictions on them. This area of the economy produces appreciable economic benefits for Cuba.

Yet, few blacks are small farmers, the only ones permitted to own sanctioned private land in Cuba and for over two decades the greatest beneficiaries of the State's monopoly and lack of productivity.

The cause for this situation is historical: freed former slaves had only two options—to eke out a living in Cuba's urban centers or become agricultural workers. Additionally, they may suffer from a deep-seated detachment from the land, perhaps the result of their centuries rootlessness and exploitation. This may, in part, be responsible for the fact that Cubans of African ancestry continue to be excluded from this important agroecomic domain.

The mere possession of U.S. currency, no matter how little, used to be cause for police repression and jail time in Cuba. Many Cubans endured considerable sentences for just such a reason, until one fine day both the economy and society became dollarized—a peremptory and self-interested government measure. Dollars became absolutely essential

for obtaining first-class services and merchandise.

As one might expect, this economic reversal made remittances to the island from Cuban émigrés one the main sources of economic wellbeing and possibilities. Once again, this put the black population at a clear disadvantage because less than 5% of the Cuban émigré population is black and mestizo. This puts the possibility of obtaining this newly established, redemptive and essential commodity—the enemy's money—out of reach for the Cuban black population.

Another way Cubans sought economic relief from the crisis and shortages was by creating small, individually- or family-owned businesses. This activity is known as *cuentapropismo* [small scale, legal self-employment]. The Cuban government decided to loosen up with regard to its ironclad, disastrous economic policies—policies that for many years prohibited this kind of activity and retarded the national economy while contributed to the daily misery of its citizens and families.

The system's own weakness has allowed *cuentapropismo* to become a source for a good amount of material prosperity for some hardworking Cubans whose constancy and devotion has allowed them to prosper a bit—despite lack of government support, arbitrary laws, and confiscatory measures. Again, few blacks are able to participate in and benefit from this activity and its earnings because they lack the basic things needed to pull it off—elegant homes, cars, remittance money—all of which would help them get many of these start-up businesses off the ground.

The government has also turned to mixed companies and foreign investment to deal with the resulting failure of its economic models and the general crisis. The only

involvement Cuban citizens are permitted in this is to serve in their labor force. These limited and controlled spheres of pseudo-capitalistic enterprise and the recent foray into the tourist industry are both important areas directly and appreciably linked to hard currency, even if the authorities reserve the right to strictly control employment, benefits, and salaries.

It is not due to any historical or cultural reason that there are very few blacks taking advantage of these opportunities. Many African descendants are more than willing, sufficiently educated, and professionally trained to work in this sector, but their access to it is subtly restricted by nearly impenetrable red tape. The degree to which this occurs is worrisome. If one were to take a stroll through a series of dollar-driven offices, dollar-shops, and tourist areas, one would find only a scant number of black specialists, managers or employees working in them, despite the fact they constitute about half the population and have supposedly had access to reputedly equal spaces and opportunities for nearly fifty years.

There is the true story of a highly esteemed specialist who when she got a position at the Academy of Sciences was surprised by her workmates: they assured her that she was hired for her qualifications—but they didn't want any blacks working in their department.

Cuban blacks and mestizos were not just uprooted from their land, exploited as living and breathing instruments of slavery and colonialism, and marginalized by the exclusionary elitism of an insensitive and inhumane part of the population that hegemonized the Republic's power and spaces. Any possibility for progress on their part was also thwarted by the manipulative paternalism of a power elite so enamored of its image and

aura it believed it had solved the problem of racism. That is how it was possible for it to repeal the right of association and put off a very necessary debate about the problem of ancestral roots and their transcendental importance for the present and future survival of the country.

Finally, the country's latest socioeconomic realities and a historical and unresolved legacy of disadvantages have once again situated blacks—a fundamentally essential segment of the nation's culture and society—at the margin of Cuban life (despite the fact, one should recall, they are not a true demographic minority).

Currently, the means by which black Cubans can attempt to achieve wellbeing and prosperity are even scarcer and less productive. Their frequent marriages to foreigners and the forced immigration of black athletes and artists are signs that they are once again looking for escape through rootlessness. This means they have to abandon their homeland and families and go elsewhere to freely seek possible opportunities that are denied them here by an indolent government with a supposedly revolutionary and inclusive ideal, and antiquated, phased out methods.

Many blacks and mestizos, principally young ones born and raised within the revolution's educational framework, have been driven to crime and other illicit activities by the everyday subversion of values, morals, and ethics that characterizes all forms of corruption in Cuba at any level. The greater the contradiction between the State's patterned discourse and the terrible reality of the country's socioeconomic situation, the more those who are the most affected by inequality and marginalization see corrupt behavior as the most natural way to achieve wellbeing.

The Cuban government finds it difficult to explain why young blacks and mestizos

make up the bulk of the island's abundant prison population. Given the responsibility that comes with so much power and control, the authorities should carry out an honest, thorough, and critical evaluation of the problem; its grave social and human implications need an urgent solution. Gravity calls for the government to abandon the simplistic and unacceptable argument it has used repeatedly to put the blame for social dysfunction in Cuba on capitalism or, in recent times, on Cuban families and citizens themselves.

The inequality, disadvantages, and exclusion the black and mestizo sector of Cuban society still endure have created fissures and tensions that threaten the ability of all of the island's citizens to peacefully contribute to Cuba's evolution and integration. Cuba's leaders should show the sensitivity and determination needed to turn this lamentable and socially harmful situation around. They could start by:

- Recognizing rights, and economic and civil spaces, so that Cubans don't find it necessary to go abroad to develop and find the wellbeing they should be able to achieve at home;

- Initiating a public and intellectual discussion about the problem—free of exclusionary tactics, prejudices, preconceived notions, and conditions—and opening it up to all those interested in participating, so they might exchange ideas, doubts, experiences, and proposals regarding the causes and possible solutions to a problem that should interest all Cubans;

- Activating efficient mechanisms that would guarantee qualified blacks and mestizos access to academic, business, and institutional positions (it is important to note that Affirmative Action has no place in Cuba because the island's African descendants are not a minority); and,



Legally self-employed person

- Opening lines of credit and financial support—based on qualifications, experience, and moral integrity—to black and mestizo private enterprise, without requiring political loyalty.

We Cuban blacks and mestizos face an historic challenge and must commit ourselves to finding a definitive way out of the barracoon and into the palenque. Circumstantially, though, today's palenque is constructed of self-awareness and the ethical and civil determination to make our worth and rights count. We should accept this challenge and the responsibility of raising not the machete but our heads, our eyes and, above all, our voices, to do away with so many years of ignominious exclusion—the mechanism by which the indolent elites and our own cultural impoverishment have kept down so fundamental a part of the Cuban nation as we are.

We have spilled a great deal of blood and sweat on this land. Only by raising our heads and voices will we ensure that our children and grandchildren have a dignified life and, above all, pride in their origins, skin color, and culture, all which they richly deserve.