

An Anonymous Social Fabric: Exclusion, Difference and Integration

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At the beginning of the third millennium, racism continues to be an aberrant and brutal social scourge: international law and almost all other contemporary judicial bodies and decrees condemn it as a crime.

The construction of race and its effect play very important social roles in Cuba, affecting the lives of its victims for long periods of time. To this day, it is also true that they bear more weight than one would think.

Historically, the race issue has been a tough nut to crack in the context of Cuban culture. Discrimination and prejudice are still a volatile plague that darkens the nation's integrity, generates feelings of insecurity, and assaults the quality of life and ethical sensibilities of Cuba's citizens.

Contemporary identity in Cuba is multiracial, multicultural, multi-religious and ethnically plural: it is the product of a process of transculturation that enriched the plentiful ethnolinguistic mosaic and ample cultural horizon of the island.

Slavery was the cruelest colonial enterprise of Cuban civil society. It was also its

greatest demographic contributor. As an institution, it was ideologically propagated by racist and humiliating codes that reduced black Africans, who were violently imported to the island, to live in the lowest of human conditions.

The sting of the painful history of slavery is still felt in Cuban society. It embodies the sound of the *contradanza* and the whip, both of which passed racism down as a natural consequence of things. Exclusion is a terrible act of violence that like poisonous weeds exacerbates prejudice and intolerance, inequality, psychological trauma and collective neurosis. It is a flagrant attack on human dignity and economic security, freedom, and progress.

Cuban racism is pathological; it has its own personality and state I.D., and is the source of many shadows. Comfortably ensconced in the tropical psyche, it is a part of the nation's dysfunctionality, which is why it continues to be so painful and worrisome an element.

Society as a whole is not immune to this pandemic, despite the clearly defined legal



tools there are against racist behavior. Given that neo-racist ideas operate organically within the parameters of exclusionary practices, invisibilization, and stigmatization—all processes of “othering”—we have at hand a very dangerous and conflictive situation.

José Martí (1853-1895), the most universal of all Cubans, still guides us and lights our path: “Being Cuban is more than white, more than mulatto, more than black.” He considered racist philosophy a binary social phenomenon with a dual effect—it called for freedom and a right to self-expression for all three races, but in the midst of a hurricane of contrary ideas and interests. Martí used his own ideas, actions, and words to masterfully face the problems of race and racism in his time.

As a group, blacks and mestizos have been the weakest link in the building of the Cuban social pyramid. Their hopes and aspirations have been confiscated. They live with pain, rage and impotence, for the most part, and yet were able to impose their presence in Cuba anyway, despite discrimination, segregation, and repression.

Whites, blacks, and mestizos all devoted their lives to the very necessary war for independence. They joined forces to redeem their homeland, to shake off the yoke of colonial-

ism. Underhanded efforts have attempted to obscure the efforts of slaves to gain their freedom, but Cuba’s maroons are among the country’s founding grandfathers: it was they who instilled in us a love of freedom and a desire to worship independence, self-esteem, and human dignity.

Beginning in 1959, the subject of racism was confronted by means of social transformations. This did bring about changes in public manifestations of discriminatory practices and ideas. Yet, juridical and structural changes on the island were not able to extirpate these prejudices from the island’s social imaginary.

A triumphant revolution abolished the institutionalized social spaces that Afro-Cubans had available to them before 1959. These might have permitted them to establish and organize a definitive project of development and integration. There was an incipient debate about racism early on, but when the revolution started down the road towards totalitarianism, the issue of race and racism became an abandoned, delayed, and silenced subject: it was not essential to its political agenda.

Those who used a political or intellectual context to issue their anti-racist battle cry were ideologically repressed and condemned,

and dealt a civil death blow. They were tagged as counterrevolutionaries against national unity, which contributed to the subject's total disappearance from public debate. Continued silence favored and contributed to its reproduction.

The crisis of the nineties, after the collapse of the Berlin Wall, brought with it even more visible inequalities; others are the result of crisis conditions and economic reforms. Neo-racist ideology flourishes and hurts those populations that have been historically discriminated and socially disadvantaged. This sort of sociological racism can create an unequal situation even during a time of more competitive employment, of a real and symbolic reevaluation of certain economic sectors.

The absence of any public debate on this subject continues to be eroded by prejudice and intolerance. It is a path littered with jagged glass, like empty words lost in a discourse of dominance, a pending assignment and systemic weakness.

The educational revolution also has not yet deconstructed the mirrors and hegemony of racial affiliation. The following contexts contribute to ongoing, ancestral intolerance: psychosocial elements of discrimination, while ideologically hidden, survive in Cuba today because of indifference towards official discourse and a lack of political will. There has been a fifty-year conspiracy of silence operating in Cuba: the subject of ethnicity has been used to fuel censorship, silence, and repression. This process has even brought about an allergy to ideological and political processes. The Seventh Congress of the National Union of Cuban Writers and Artists (UNEAC) brought up questions about racism, but there is resistance to negotiating a dialogic space that might contribute to making this pandemic—which

keeps eating away at the nation's spiritual fabric—more visible to the public eye. It continues to be unimportant on the discussion agenda of so-called avant-garde political organizations.

In fact, it was this very “political avant garde” that provoked a frontal attack on religious manifestations of African origin in Cuba. A few timid economic reforms in the 1990s did manage to open up a space for racial difference. The emerging economy—particularly the tourist industry, mixed corporations, Cuban commercial entities, and dollar-store chains—created a special barrier based on the color line.

Moving the labor force around also had its own barriers. Refuge was taken in the corporate mentality, and perfect suitability for a job became the mechanism by which race-based exclusion functioned. Blacks and mestizos are underrepresented in the country's emerging economic structure, in first-rate managerial positions, and at the top of the business ladder. Many have jobs that are not commensurate with their level of education and training.

Racism is not seen as an institutionalized policy, but there are areas and individuals in the State's Central Administration that in exercising their power employ a theory of whitening as a mechanism of exclusion. The most significant examples can be found at the Ministry of External Affairs (MINREX), the Ministry of Culture (MINCULT), the Ministry of Foreign Investment and Economic Collaboration (MINVEC), as well as the Institute for Aeronautics and Civil Aviation (IACC), the Institute of Radio and Television (ICRT) and even the Office of the City of Havana's Historian.

Cuba's media offices, which actively encourage prejudice and stereotypes, keep the intimate diversity of Cubans off the air

and radio waves. The identity of blacks, mestizos, and other marginalized people, is kept invisible on the audiovisual map of Cuba. This is a terribly undermined area in which there is a total absence of social pluralism: linguistic and aesthetic racism have free reign in the media.

The audiovisual model that is projected on Cuba's media turns blacks and mestizos into an anonymous mass. They play no leading roles. Instead, they are reserved for parts in which they personify social disadvantage or are stuck in the historical past, despite the fact that they constitute a very important part of the visible soul of Cuba.

Functionaries and agents of internal stability in Cuba use a selective policy of harassment towards young black and mestizo men, as a mechanism of social control, primarily in urban areas.

There are socioeconomic differences between neighborhoods. Blacks and mestizos live crowded in the most deteriorated poor neighborhoods, the ones most affected by indiscriminate population density. Their urban housing is also the unhealthiest, due to a housing shortage, and constant migration to urban centers from depressed areas elsewhere in the interior of the island. These migrants have no choice but to risk becoming further marginalized, as well.

The black cultures that came from Africa exist primarily in published bibliographies on Cuban religion and folklore, as if they were catalogued yet forgotten items. One never sees them listed under the category of philosophy or thought. Ideological and cultural mechanisms make easy the constant and indiscriminate use of a miscegenatory discourse. This is a double-sided policy that permits manipulation, so that it can be held up as a narrative of harmonic integration. This

discursive network is a mask that silences indifference and the rejection of others.

Blacks are collectively marginalized in the visual and published historical master narratives; they get no more than superficial and dogmatic treatment with regard to their cultural contributions. This shameful situation compels Cuban society to face the following challenges:

- A deconstruction of the corrosive effects of the audiovisual map offered in Cuba today and a policy to allow members of different ethnic groups to play more important roles that restore self-esteem and dignity to them therein;

- Recognition of the intellectual abilities of people of color, striking indifference from cultural spaces and the media, and promoting equality and respect in cultural pluralism; and,

- Overcoming the endemic plague of marginality through preventative programs and crafting affirmative actions policies to negotiate the integration of the entire population.

It is hoped for the citizens of this new republic in transition that social pluralism will reign supreme in their country's spiritual mansion and that Martí's ideal about "the full dignity of men" be its only currency.

Clarity, above all, is needed for dealing with this problem because indifference is an obstacle to debate. May a rebellious cry forever silence authoritarian acts. Any delay in dealing with this reality will not contribute to the very necessary social healing of this historical trauma. If we are to fight it, we must look racism in the face, consider it the perversion it is, and make ethical and political decisions equal to eliminating it from the republic Martí saw as being "with all and for the good of all."