

The United States: Not as Racist as Cuba?

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Real life events can offer an unquestionable lesson: a democracy that upholds the idea that an individual's basic human rights are the best way for him or her to realize fulfillment, over the long term, without posing a threat to the government. All one needs to do is cast a glance at the United States' presidential campaign to find a wonderful example of this lesson.

It is not my intention to question processes, premises or other characteristics of the constitutional laws that shape the rules concerning the election of a U.S. president. Rather, I want to focus on the fact that a black citizen has been able to insert himself into a space that heretofore was the exclusive domain of the Anglo-Saxon population.

Barack Obama has shattered all predictions. By keeping his ratings and electability up with voters, and winning the Democratic Party's nomination from fellow Democrat and former First Lady Hillary Clinton, he has created a milestone in his country's history, perhaps unwittingly.

This young senator could well be the next inhabitant of the White House. Some see him as a sort of phenomenon; others prefer to see in his possible victory hope for a change in policies and strategies that will

bring about social improvements, more economic stability, and a different worldview—one that could mitigate much of the negative public opinion of the U.S. held beyond its borders.

Black citizens in this country have been clearing the way over the past four decades. Today, they can be found occupying positions they could only dream about years back. Leaving aside any ideological or political inclinations, one must consider two individuals that have wielded great responsibility amongst the power elite: Condoleezza Rice and Colin Powell. One might question their conservative politics, but they have certainly not served as decorative figureheads. Even if racism in this society is still a very current topic, there are nuances and, above all, irrefutable facts regarding the subject whose interpretation escapes the generalization, crudeness, and tone of the events leading up to the late 1960s. One need not compile facts and manipulate them to present a version of reality that no one with any sense at all would dare refute. Blacks, who in the past were chased like beasts by hordes of racist white men desirous of burning them alive, who were hanged and humiliated in the most horrible ways imaginable, no longer have to

worry about lynching or any other violent form of death.

It is true that racism in the U.S. is highly sophisticated, but there are also police boards, laws and other means that offer some protection to its victims, even if they don't mitigate it entirely.

The Obama phenomenon goes beyond U.S. borders. In Cuba, it has worked to bring about a reexamination of U.S.-inspired racist concepts and made the Cuban government feel defensive about its shortcomings with regard to this issue. The fact that there is little information made available about Obama in Cuba, or little coverage of the presidential race, confirms the government's campaign of disinformation: to hide events that put the governmental regime's publicists in a bad spot. All those critical references to the U.S. system and its faults, among which racism is frequently featured, no longer have the same level of credibility.

There is a black contender in the U.S. presidential campaign; that reveals something very significant about changes that have occurred within this country, regardless of the election's outcome. Constituting around 13.4% of the population, African

Americans have a candidate whose rhetoric reflects the country's integration and values—ideals that are upheld by the entire population with no exceptions. He does not want a black republic, nor to be a vainglorious leader, nor to inspire any other divisive feelings. He acts as would any other citizen who aspired to the presidency; if he is victorious, he wants to implement an agenda set on goals that go beyond the color line.

The few fleeting images of Barack Obama on Cuban television have been greatly useful to many Cuban blacks. They serve as counterexamples to a destiny that doubtlessly excludes true integration. Blacks in Cuba, particularly dark-skinned ones, know their place all too well: they are subject to a marginalization and segregation imposed and maintained by a caste of bureaucrats and politicians with no intention whatsoever of changing their racist views.

When compared to the total African American population of the U.S., just the number of blacks in positions of political power in the U.S. is notable and indicative of their evolution via an ongoing struggle. The fight may not be over yet but there are reasons to celebrate—successes—some quite



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notable, irreversible and efficient in increasing the dignity of a race that had and still has the misfortune of sometimes being undervalued and the object of verbally and circumstantially horrible acts.

In Cuba, though, where they represent a higher proportion of the population (close to 60% black and mestizo), the true participation of black and mulatto citizens is distortedly and totally reversed.

Their full participation in the wars of independence against Spanish colonialism, their efforts in a nation-building process that has resulted in a more than one hundred year-old republic has brought them little reward. They are still unable to create a coherent plan for their development and true sovereignty.

Black Cubans need role models to help them take their self-esteem out of the deep-freeze. The media could play an important role. Just positive media exposure to individuals *not* playing the lowest human element, as is typically the case, would be one way to start deconstructing the idea that Afro-Cubans, usually the darkest-skinned ones, are inferior, contemptible, and lacking in intelligence.

Morgan Freeman, Denzel Washington, Wesley Snipes, Eddie Murphy, Danny Glover and Whoopi Goldberg are just a few examples of black people whose thoughts and actions seek to dignify their race. They are simply a group of African-American performers who through their work in film and television have contributed to the shattering of taboos, sending a message in which blacks are not a paradigm of inferiority, or some sort of simian with an inclination towards reason.

The struggle against a kind of thinking that seemed unchangeable has been long. Yet, there are reasons to rejoice and look towards

a future beyond the obstacles that always seem to be in the way. All this is a celebration of dialectics, a model of virtue and perseverance that seeks to integrate itself, and raise consciousness in a society about the fact that sizing up a human being based on his or her skin color is much too onerous an aberration for any self-respecting nation.

It doesn't even matter if Barack Obama becomes the next U.S. president. History has already inscribed him as the first black man to have a real chance at the presidency of the world's most powerful nation. Save few rare exceptions, it is unfortunate that in Cuba we cannot hope for the same, but the structures that push blacks to the bottom of the social ladder still operate there.

The most tragic thing about all this is that in Cuba practical discussions of this matter keep being put off. There are a few debates, but they don't go much beyond formal conversations. To talk about facts and not seek solutions is like building castles in the air. Racism will be near the top when an accounting of the failures of socialism and the one-party system is completed.

Our fate might be better in a democracy. At least we could publicly air our experiences, doubts, and ideas, without fear of incarceration. There are currently no such guarantees in Cuba for debating so thorny an issue without fear of retribution on the part of the authorities or their political police.

What I have written here could be considered a tremendous offense to socialist legitimacy: this might be indicative of how many remain fearfully silent, and continue to avoid a subject whose discussion can bring disastrous consequences. I am fully aware that in doing this I am putting something uncomfortably close to us in perspective. I am once again convinced that there is more racism in Cuba than in the United States.