

The Obama Revolution: A View from Cuba

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It seems to me that ‘revolution’ is not acceptable as a concept through which to bring about a society’s transformation, or with which to describe a process of political change. It is a stale and epistemologically false concept: political revolutions that have not encountered some sort of counterbalancing pressure are always like cyclical geophysical convulsions—they always come right back to where they started. Yet, it is a commonly used term. The intention of those who employ it is

to communicate that something profound is going on somewhere. Thus, it has value as a metaphor, and I use it here in an attempt to contextualize a specific matter.

The way I see it, the United States has undergone three revolutions: one in 1776, that brought about independence; one in 1968, which involved the civil rights struggles led by Martin Luther King, Jr.; and a currently ongoing one (in 2008), whose main figure is Barack Hussein Obama. The first one affected the

entire nation from within; the second, the entire nation by only one of its constituencies; the third, the entire nation both from within and by only one of its constituencies. The first was the politico-economic process by which the nation-state was created; the other two are socio-cultural processes that work to complete the nation-building project. That is why it took all Americans to carry out the first revolution, but the second and third involve only a minority and deal with issues that encumber the entire nation. Such is the Obama revolution: speaking from a minority position, he tells the country he is living proof that the United States can finally be totally realized as a nation.

I want to clarify that I am talking about the Obama revolution and not *Obama's* revolution. The second would require him to be in power, and I should justify my statement, which I will begin to do in negative fashion. The incendiary comments that Obama's former spiritual guru made revealed Reverend Wright to be a racist individual who in his own rancorous way delights in the fact that one of his own is 'making it' but does so while dredging up lots of historical suffering. But if Wright is somehow also responsible for the book *The Audacity of Hope*, then we are witnessing a catharsis centuries in the making in someone who saw many hopes shattered by a lack of audacity.

On the other hand, Geraldine Ferraro, who had an honorary role in Senator Hillary Clinton's campaign, could not keep herself from blurting out that Obama "would not be in the position he is" if he were white instead of black. As an uncontrolled outburst, it reflects all authentic change—the resistance of those—who like Ferraro—are supposedly progressive.

It is the same with the media. At one moment, the liberal, progressive, and influen-

tial *New York Times* endorsed Clinton without much worrying about the profound message the Kennedy clan sent when it supported Obama almost from the start. And forget about other newspapers. None of the economic dailies, *The Washington Post* or *Washington Times*, bothered to even put their ears to the ground to see what was coming, Topeka Indian style. In fact, *The Wall Street Journal* takes the prize for anti-Obamaphilia.

But what was coming was right there in plain view. Obama's moving speech about racial division in the United States was an Internet success and was seen by approximately 2.5 million people in only three days. It also served to reaffirm the one he gave two years earlier, in June 2006, on religion and politics. That speech is considered one of the most important of the last forty years.

Furthermore, this Obama revolution has two perfectly compatible and associated faces: where some see a black man who is president, others see a president who is black. This ends a cultural cycle that puts the United States in the historical forefront—despite George W. Bush.

Bill Richardson, representing another minority, quickly understood the importance of that cultural cycle, too. A competitor for the Democratic nomination who represents Hispanics and is Governor of New Mexico, Bill Richardson was the second notable—after the Catholic Kennedy clan—to support Obama and ask Clinton to make a timely and honorable withdrawal from the race—for the good of the party. He called for her to get behind "the only President who could unify the country," which caused a CNN commentator to immediately say that "it could be the beginning of the end for Clinton," and *The New York Times*, itself, to compare her situation to that of Ralph Nadar and Al Gore.

Why is Obama so fascinating to Mario Vargas Llosa, an Argentine citizen, Arab lead-

ers, and all of Africa, of course; and not fascinating to too many in the Latin world or almost anyone in Cuba? The following quote from Obama on October 12th (*el Día de la Hispanidad, Día de la Raza, Columbus Day*) may contain the answer: “There is not a white America, another African American one, and yet another Hispanic one. There is only one America.” Yet, it is not the answer. Obama is fascinating because no intellectual since John F. Kennedy has so vividly expressed the possibilities there are for renewing the American nation. As Cuban political analyst Leonardo Calvo Cárdenas would say, Obama seems to be the man the U.S. was waiting for without knowing it. He has won most of the primaries, most of the delegates and superdelegates, and the support of young people...and he knows how to do damage control without losing his cool: his dignity, his aura as a leader, and the appearance of being loyal, as he proved during the Wright crisis, all contribute to his appeal.

There is something about this man that causes 10,000 people to volunteer and work on his campaign—many more than Clinton got, and this is still going on at an unprecedented rate. This must certainly annoy the Cuban and Cuban-American political elites, particularly all those small campaign donations sent by thousands and thousands of people, most of whom are low and middle income folks. They are akin to the Tampa cigar workers who helped José Martí during the late nineteenth century.

As a Harvard alumnus who directed its prestigious law review, and being the nation's only current black senator, are truly beautiful credentials for belonging to the *jet set*. They are indicators of a cultural potential that can forever dispel the race-based prejudice that suggests that a black man cannot lead a world power.

This is what is clearly in the offing right now and it is obvious that a society needing change in a time of changes cannot afford to miss just such an opportunity. Many countries that don't understand this could learn a keen lesson from the U.S. at this juncture. Certainly there is racism in the U.S. The flame of racism will always burn in the land of the Ku Klux Klan, but the United States is not a racist society, unlike Cuba and the Dominican Republic, and I know perfectly well that this statement—which points to a very subtle difference—might shock and confuse many.

Racism exists everywhere. Old-style racism is based on racial or color lines; there are new forms of racism that claim the superiority of one human group over others for all sorts of reasons: ethnic, ideological, or political. There is the racism of eugenics, which bases itself on the notion that a certain kind of man is *superior* because of his ancestral, genetic makeup, as in the Nazi example. There are also other forms of racism that maintain that a man is *superior* because of his ideology, and that the specimen that best fits this description is the *new* Guevarian man. The moment a notion of superiority takes hold in a society, racism, too, can take hold in it, unperceived. Thus, racism might be as old as prostitution and homosexuality, and last until the end of time.

Yet, we cannot say that a whole society is racist because there is some racism in its midst. For this to be true one would necessarily have to find some kind of institutionalized form of it at work: if that's not the case, or it was suppressed, that means it is on its way out. Yet, believing states to be the only source of institutional legitimacy, or the only thing that produces cohesive institutions, has created a false notion that there is no better place for racism to rear its head than where it is most visible. And there is nothing more visible than a coun-

try's institutions—except that the complete opposite is true, too. If we accept the notion that racist interests are best served by and through institutions, then they have only existed in a few places where people who were different were denied access by legal means or by social or corporate institutions: India, South Africa, the United States, Germany, Cuba, Brazil and a few others. Hence the conclusion that there is no longer any racism in the world, because after the end of apartheid in South Africa, no reasonable state would institutionally segregate human beings along racial or ethnic lines, or because of the color of their skin.

It is not enough to say a country is not racist because it does not segregate, as is the case in Cuba. Almost no state is racist, but many societies still are, and a society in which the rhetoric the government uses to control how its society's members culturally and socially coexist is discriminatory, it is racist—regardless of what its written or practical conventions say regarding the matter.

When in U.S. society 92% of the people consulted by a *Newsweek* poll said they would vote for a black presidential candidate, and 59% believe that their society is ready to accept a black leader and that society's cultural norms have changed, that is something our anti-Yankee rhetoric will never concede. Beyond freedom of expression, something any free and democratic society is obligated to guarantee, racism is now culturally marginalized in the U.S. and punished by law in quite a number of cases. What might a racist joke in the U.S. bring about now? Something that would never happen in Cuba, a very humorous country where both blacks and whites love to make jokes at the expense of the *other* race, and humor serves as the very best way for sophisticated societies to hide or lose themselves in an inescapable multicultural context.

This is why Obama has inspired so much hope in Cuba. Yet, at this juncture, it is not convenient for the Cuban government or a large part of Cuban society to have its racism exposed from afar, particularly since their rhetoric always claimed that there was racism in the U.S. but not in Cuba.

One has only to look at the island's media to fully appreciate the impact of the Obama revolution in Cuba. The racist mentality held by the elites who shape or attempt to shape public opinion through their publications is worthy of study. What is notable is not so much what is said—or even the body language employed when talking about Obama—but what is not said about him (which is not much, even though he is a global phenomenon). What has taken primacy? Silence—above all else. The Cuban media's silence on the cultural connotations of the Obama revolution is entirely characteristic. There hasn't been one reference to Obama's background in the media. Nothing about his directly African half from his father's side; nothing about the fact he grew up in Indonesia either. Few know that his wife and children are black, which is in sharp contrast with all the publicity garnered by the Clintons (their daughter Chelsea became quickly well-known during her father's first campaign). Few studies in Cuba attempt to examine the sociological and cultural changes that have occurred in the U.S., where blacks are no longer the country's largest minority group.

A professor and analyst from the Ministry of Foreign Relations' Institute of International Relations came to say that Obama was definitely not black but mulatto. In saying this, he was translating and projecting his own personal racism. As a racial classification, it may be valid for Cubans or Dominicans, but not for U.S. blacks. This reveals a certain, early twentieth-century *criollo* mentality—one that viewed miscegenation as necessary so that

blacks could be purified and assimilated into Cuba. This ideology, borne of the nineteenth century throughout almost all of Latin America, created this “dreadful identification” and saw miscegenation as an unwitting result of white colonization. It is only fair to say, though, that the last century’s Brazilian sociologist Gilberto Freyre, who saw miscegenation as a positive force, is a notable exception.

The complexity of the Obama revolution’s impact in Cuba goes beyond all this. Cubans are somewhat premodern and immature when it comes to certain aspects of their thinking, i.e., they do not tend towards self-analysis and introspection. They do not see their own society as racist, even though it is. It hides behind its own image of itself, the same image the state has; it sees racism only as some vestige or reminiscence of the past that has no bearing on the present. It is that very lack of introspection that keeps Cubans from seeing that both society and the state have their own past and that both laugh when they see someone on TV making fun of blacks. Could anything else other than being able to comfortably laugh at others better demonstrate just how institutionalized racism is in Cuba? Only the power of life and death that states take for themselves could.

Obama has exposed everyone in Cuba: blacks and whites. Very few—particularly blacks—answer positively when asked if he has a chance to become President of the United States. Of course, if one considers that these opinions are not based on information—because it is not available—then one can examine a prejudice that is almost in its purist form, because it feeds more off ingrained references and preferences than it does from an objective analysis of the current state of cultural and political tendencies in U.S. society.

Cubabarómetro, a Cuban polling agency that focuses on civil society (directed by Dr.

Darsi Ferrer, a Cuban doctor whose excellent work in this area is known among dissident circles), asked the following question of 49 whites from all levels of Cuban society: *Do you think it is possible that someday, after the current government’s mandate is over, a black man will be elected President of Cuba?* Only 4% of those polled answered ‘yes.’ More than two thirds of them (69.3%) said ‘no,’ and the rest (26.5) claimed not to know. This confirms my earlier observations.

It is fair to say that for a multicolored and biracial progressive minority, the Obama phenomenon is revolutionary. It is a mirror in which we will come face to face with our own racist demons; it will facilitate a profound discussion of the matter, which will be an improvement from the ongoing, second-rate conversation of a small number of blacks (the educated portion of one of the third of Cuban’s black population) whose purpose it is to please those in power.

It is my fervent wish that Obama not end up like the protagonist in Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*, a book in which we learn about a brilliant black student from Alabama, in 1947, who after proving himself in school was being forced to prove himself once more, this time by literally fighting against his own people—his black brothers (with himself, that is)—to the satisfaction and delight of a group of white spectators.

Should this not come to pass (should Obama win), the Obama revolution will have a global impact and reach, a phenomenon from whose impact Cuba cannot and will not escape. Then we could look forward to *Obama’s* revolution, which is another thing entirely.

Note:

1- The author has already analyzed some of the ideas expressed in this article in the Cuban newspaper *Consenso* (Havana).