

The Black Man: The Object of Others

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All human affairs must have the capacity for a scandal. There would be no problems or progress at all if it were not for scandals.

The scandal surrounding Rodney King, that U.S. black man who was brutally humiliated by the police, revealed that progress in the area of black civil rights in the United States—from Rosa Parks and Martin Luther King to laws protecting civil rights and Affirmative Action—hide the fact that U.S. society is permeated by racism and that there seems to be no definitive solution to this problem in that country.

Outbreaks of racist attacks in many European societies reflect this as well—that somewhere within certain important sectors of those societies there are those who believe themselves to be superior and hide the disdain they feel for blacks, Indians, mestizos and anyone else who is ethnically or culturally other.

Racism is global. Blacks are humiliated and enslaved even in the Arab and Muslim world, as is the case in Sudan and other places the press does not mention.

Of course, there is racism in Latin American, too. They do a good job of it in those societies—Argentina, Brazil, Mexico, and Chile—with whose literary culture I am most familiar. There they obscure their racism behind that shameful ‘Third World’ smokescreen behind which we tend to hide when we are in a tough spot south of the Rio Grande—which is always.

And now we come to Cuba, where racism is such a natural thing that if we watch Cuban television via the politically integrationist lens of the so-called Cuban Revolution—with its coterie of upwardly mobile, rabid Communists who in the ‘safety’ of the corporative rights they derive from ‘private property,’ ‘resist’ giving blacks any space or, if they do, they decide when and how they should appear on the nation’s TV screens. Of course the State should not be given this advantage, no so much because it doesn’t deserve it but because it cannot culturally cleanse itself of its own rejection of or disdain for blacks—even if it tried with all its might. Thus, in considering the example of Cuban television we are witnessing a repeated and repeatable reality.

All this happens because there are no scandals. The Cuban case, which is the most interesting to me, although not just because it is the closest—since I am interested in wherever there is racism—demonstrates that if we do not have a scandal we cannot think in terms of a problem or progress. We do not need a Rodney King case; there is enough cause for scandal in everyday events. If it is true that the so-called Cuban Revolution—an old project—attempted to end this scourge, then my hypothesis about scandal being a necessary instrument for approaching our current problems, which need a solution, holds: racism is one of those problems.

Cuba is racist, we Cubans are racists and the future national project will reproduce racism, although not more than in the Dominican Republic. Am I saying that all Cubans are trapped in this web? No, fortunately not. What I am saying is that the cultural norms that determine behavior and frames of references for our mutual existence are racist, and most of society sees itself as obliged to follow these as much out of tradition as because it is the cultural underpinning of the political State. Moreover, I'd say that Cuban society would have to make an incredible effort—through sociology and rhetoric—to show it was not racist. Until recently, there was no discussion about the subject of racism in Cuba. The denial of its existence was and still is common in some way or other. Yet, this is not shocking. The French intellectual Pierre Bourdieu writes in most of his essays that in our day of the culture of masses social stereotypes function like the popular myths of the Middle Ages, their purpose—to veil and avert the gaze of the downtrodden to some other place.

Of course, there is a conversation currently taking place among Cubans. Abroad, there is Alejandro de la Fuente's ongoing

work in Pittsburgh, there is Ramón H. Colás's work in Mississippi, there is Juan Antonio Alvarado's work with the journal *ISLAS*, which is very interesting. In their own way, they are all following the path shown by Charles Moore, who since the 1960s pointed a finger at the racism in the Revolution's emancipatory project.

The situation in Cuba is so-so. The discursive spaces opened up by Tomás Fernández Robaina and Tato Quiñones, who are pioneers in this area, are promising. Color Cubano, with Gisela Arandia; the *Cofradía de la Negritud* [the Brotherhood of Blackness], with Norberto Mesa; the *Movimiento de Integración Racial* [the Movement for Racial Integration], with José Vélez; or, more recently, the *Ciudadanos por la Integración Racial* [Citizens for Racial Integration] project, promoted by the *Arco Progresista*, which are closer to my position, all bear witness to the problem. There were also shining moments—when singer-songwriter Gerardo Alfonso tried to open up a space in the nineties, and both Elvira Cervera and Walter Carbonell went public on just how marginalized any attempt to culturally, politically, intellectually and academically explore the black issue in Cuba had become. Intellectuals like Ileana Faguauga or Roberto Zurbano have opened up the discussion, each in his or her own way, seconding other attempts to do so that are heard about in Havana or Santiago de Cuba, which reflect the great concern there is on the subject. An academic like Esteban Morales just published a book on the subject and the Communist Party wants to promote an initiative regarding a centennial celebration on the founding of the Independent Party of Color, in 1908.

Yet, we are still very bad off. If everything I have just enumerated is any indication of the status of the debate on race and



racism in Cuba—not very dynamic and somewhat dated—then we have made little progress in the project of the advancement of people of color. Cuban pragmatism—with its cultural underpinnings, its national demographic, its agents for the historical project, economic situation and spiritual refuge—has a tendency for immediate solutions, which simply reflects a simple fact that three, post-1959 public censuses dare to reveal: Cuba is a majority black country governed by a white almost-majority that historically has known how to manipulate the racial issue. Furthermore, if the concept colored or people of color weren't used in Cuba, a concept that those in power use to gaze at its others and fragments the black spectrum into all its real and imaginary shades, the country's population would be seen differently and images of the island would match its actual reality.

That is why shock is the first reaction of any foreign observer who arrives in Cuba and takes a look around, which makes the problem morally shameful for us. The immorality of this situation should bring about an intellectual crisis or scandal: an academic debate, a call to all citizens and for diverse solutions to Cuba's most fundamental problem: racism.

Why hasn't this happened? There are many reasons but I'll focus on one, blacks are the objects of others—including black others. For more than twenty years, the black issue has served only to fuel staged discussions, like those exquisite concerts that take place behind closed doors, for just a few people, and the music cannot be heard out of doors. This resulted in three things—a re-folklorization of the topic; a dominant academic and not intellectual approach to the subject, which keeps the discussion free of sensitive problematization—sort of like

what happened to the Jewish question in the context of Émile Zola and the Dreyfus Affair; and a gap between becoming aware of a problem and making progress with regard to that recognized problem.

The fact that blacks are the object of others means that their agents in cultural, political, historical and academic agents in Cuba define and absorb them into categories of their own invention: suppressing their voices, limiting their movements, instrumentalizing their religiosity and bodies, turning all that into an aesthetic performance and reproducing it at a social and political scale. Where are blacks in all of this? As the objects they are, they are fragmented, as a whole, marginalized or in prison.

This is why I earlier asserted that blacks are Cuba's fundamental problem. Democracy is a basic problem whose solution lies in deeds. Before the Revolution, we had a democracy that embraced racism; with the Revolution, we have a few emancipating principles that reproduce it; for the future, we have political projects that will prolong it.

Where to go?

On the one hand, on the side of those in power, the rhetoric of progress more or less says that the Revolution has done a great deal to eliminate racial discrimination, but that this is an inherited cultural problem that cannot be solved by simple decree or little understood social policies.

This is a rhetoric that turns against itself, because it implies that in the past fifty years the Revolution has lacked the necessary cultural policies to guarantee—if not the elimination—at least the severe limitation of racism in Cuban society. But, that is just the beginning of the problem. The absence of

adequate cultural policies leads one to conclude that the Revolution was culturally racist (how could they not see the race problem with so many blacks?) and to use as an historical alibi something that would have required a less revolutionary focus, an intellectual debate for relevant solutions, which would also have meant admitting that the Revolution existed despite a basic problem, without properly projecting it. If one exists despite a problem that is both unaccepted and lacks cultural projection, what do we gain? Its reproduction.

Seen from this perspective, the fundamental question is how to keep racism from being reproduced within the Revolution's very concepts. Is the Revolution employing the appropriate cultural foci to make way for a solution to the problem? If it is, it should understand that a cultural focus and a revolutionary one are not one and the same thing, a fact that has been amply proven already by the Revolution's cultural policies, which have never addressed the issue of racism in Cuban society. If it doesn't, trying instead to employ a scientific focus, this is no way to avoid the reproduction of the problem in a political context. As cultural anthropologists know well, there is no social science capable of providing an appropriate focus on the problem, and it is quite another thing to talk about anthropology as science. Thus, if we accept that a revolutionary-cultural focus on an issue that is a cultural problem within the very Revolution is possible, then we are back to where we started, that is, that blacks are the objects of others.

For me there is yet another crucial angle regarding blacks in Cuba that the new rhetoric ignores, and it ignores it precisely because its fragments its object, it is the existence of an immanent tolerance towards the cultures of African origin. This is a topic I will

explore in a different essay, but that is at the core of any approach to blacks in Cuba. In strong political terms, tolerance is, I feel obliged to say, counter-revolutionary. As if in an exercise of complete fiction, we would do well to ask ourselves what the Níco López Communist Party School would be like if it were run by a Revolutionary babalawo [a Yoruba Priest of Orunmila]. The answer is rhetorical; it is interesting to note how the same Holism that is inherent in all revolutions does not see blacks in a holistic manner. I expect my careful reading of Esteban Morales's book to reveal a more detailed, subsequent analysis of this issue.

On the other side, that of the other elite that aspires to power in Cuba, the situation is equally bad. In this case, in which the meta-physical abstraction of the Revolution has done less damage, blacks are also the objects of others.

An earlier work of mine¹ on this subject tried to problematize one of these foci (there is no pluralism in the Revolution), whose substance and intention was to strip blacks of their entire legacy, to Christianize them according to the dogma of the Catholic Church. This was the ethical dream of all of Cuba's elites—a truly alarming dream.

Yet, another even more alarming book that found its way to my hands caused my concern for blacks in Cuba to grow even more, beyond any previous one. The book, *Los cubanos, historia de Cuba en una lección* [Cubans, a History of Cuba in one Lesson], by one of the best and brightest Cuban intellectuals I know of—Carlos Alberto Montaner. This is how the book begins:

“I begin by establishing my place as an observer: this history of Cubans is narrated from a Spanish or Eurocentric point of view. Its perspective is purposely European and it

is logical that it be thus. It is not the same to narrate a history from a Siboney Indian point of view, from a slave descendant's point of view, or from that a Cantonese Chinese person might have had during the second half of the nineteenth century, while serving as an indentured servant after a decrease in the slave trade.”

It goes on:

“If I choose this particular perspective it is because that nation we call Cuba was fundamentally defined by Spanish values, customs and perceptions, even if after centuries other enriching elements attributable to different black ethnic groups from the great African cultures became part of the mix. Thus, I am going to speak of Spain in order to be able to understand Cuba.”²

There is a popular expression in Cuban slang that almost always comes up in a doubting or questioning way. It is used to express disbelief at denial, or a contradiction of the obvious. What are we talking about? A question any Cuban might ask in light of this situation.

My answer is that we're talking about racism. This affirmation, which requires no analysis from the point of view of the culture's history, also does require it in the context of the elite's political gambles with the future of Cuba.

I want to clarify as much as possible that any project for the future of Cuba that minimized, hides, trivializes or folklorizes the subject of race in Cuba is a racist project, no matter what party it belongs to or what position it takes. It is not conceivable that at this time, in the twenty-first century—with all its progress in the area of the history of mentalities and culture, local history and cultur-

al anthropology—it is not possible to project the future of Cuba from a point of view that does not address the question of race and racism. This is already a fundamental issue in the countries of northern Europe, where they are trying to understand the issues that come with migration from Africa.

If such is the case, I will make another assertion: to understand Cuba from a Spanish perspective is like trying to understand Spain from the perspective of the Roman Empire, without taking into consideration eight centuries of Arab rule.

There is an effort about to create a new re-colonized vision of Cuba that attempts to highlight cultural ties with Spain and obscure those to Africa. This is the rhetoric of a solid compact Spain made to order for the greedy interests of the Spanish today.

The obfuscation of Africa, which turns blacks into an absent object of others, reproduces within any political project the Hispanic concepts with which the elite tried to construct the Cuban nation, which brought about failure for the project and progress.

This reveals the fears I have already expressed in earlier debates, and I really want to point to something that marks the political progress of the ideas of certain white elites both inside and outside Cuba, which can also be found in the aforementioned book:

“...blacks do not fit within the premises of the nation as it has been defined thus far. Nothing more. The problem with these premises is that blacks are most definitely present in the actual nation, the one that exists and forged its identity any way it could. Reality always introduces elements that complicate strict foci.

There is at least one sector of the elite that is unworried by historical and cultural issues, who believed and believes that blacks should take their place (where?); that there should be no more talk of mixing and that there should be an intellectual, economic, and political effort to legitimize the elite's de facto supremacy in society. This is a perspective that is short on intellectuals with enough of the kind of courage necessary to undertake the public challenge and accomplish this, and who till now have expressed themselves through gestures that have served only to reaffirm themselves and their disdain for blacks.

Another sector of the elite, one with a minimum amount of cultural and historical sensitivity and that is somewhat drawn to miscegenation, believes that blacks should occupy a place that makes them feel like integrated participants, for which they would have to be groomed; but that all this should happen without giving them a permanent place in the elite's basic levels, in order to avoid any contamination that might weaken the dominance that it inherited by dint of the culture and effort of the 'founding fathers.' For them, having blacks present in their marginal circles shows the success of their project and demonstrates the value, functionality, and modernism of their pedagogical project. There are blacks outside those marginal circles, of course. Let them symbolically reproduce themselves in their ritual ghettos and filter their culture for the folkloric and aesthetic use of those in power. This is a good mechanism of long distance control that guarantees the project's stability and good conscience in relation to the inevitable inferiority of blacks. It gives the project and country's external image a necessary specter of modernity, and many blacks

and mulattoes are extremely happy with appearing symbolic and instrumental.

Finally, there is a third elite sector with a maximum of cultural and historical sensitivity. It believes blacks should take their position in a place where they cannot distort the paradigms of Cuban culture. They know that the place of Cuban blacks is Cuba, thus the culture should accept Africanness. How does it do so? Via a strange sense of guilt for what their ancestors did, it accepts a responsibility that is not theirs for the slave trade and slavery. It begs forgiveness of the nation for that historical error; it wants to correct the past from this present position. It proposes to blacks the following transaction: we will incorporate the aesthetic richness of your culture and the grace and agility of your movement. In exchange, you must give up certain savage and primitive practices, and certain ideas that in no way coincide with our national framework or the project that was founded and left to us by regal, moral and visionary men. “When these men brought you here, enriched themselves and had the time and disposition to imagine a nation, but they did not realize that your arrival jeopardized their own project...”³

I included this extensive quote because I want to comment upon a fourth sector of the elite that is becoming more and more visible. In their view of the future, there are no blacks. Blacks are the object of an invisible other who does not clarify his position, the possible opportunities, the contributions blacks can and will make—in any democratic debate they demand. This is the racist focus that is so forcefully defended both inside and outside Cuba—of either a democratic elite, like that in the United States, or an informed democracy in which blacks will have little to do or say. This sector assumes for the future

that someone must definitely lose in this process, because of the difficulty of implementing a new political project or a market economy with high technological demands in this age of knowledge. And, of course, blacks will be those great losers; that is why there is an ongoing intellectual reconstruction of the history and paradigms fundamental to Cuban culture, which includes a reevaluation of values, all of which is more important than blacks.

The danger is truly great. It calls us to address the entire citizenry of Cuba and for a black voice to vindicate the social, cultural, and political place of blacks in Cuba without reproducing the racist framework that is projected by both those in power and those not in power—all the elites who strive for control of the future of Cuba.

The only cultural way out of this, the only way to reconstruct a postmodern Cuba that embraces tolerance as an essential value in a pluralistic and diverse culture is to interrupt the staged discussions and the Eurocentric reinterpretation of our history, and make it so that blacks can empower themselves.

Notes:

1- Cuesta Morúa, Manuel. “Cuba: el racismo que se lleva dentro”. *ISLAS* 6: 2 (Mayo 2007).

2- Montaner, Carlos Alberto. *Los Cubanos. Historia de Cuba en una Lección*. Miami: Brickell Communications Group, 2006: 13.

3- Cuesta Morúa, Manuel. *Op. Cit.*: 30-31.