

Racial Discrimination in Cuba: An Open Secret

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There is a prevailing racist mentality in Cuba. There is more than enough evidence to support this contention. Eight, mostly black Cuban intellectuals close to the island's upper echelons made declarations to counter the public denouncement made by sixty, U.S., African-Americans. Yet, these efforts were hardly credible enough to cover up a reality that has plagued our popular consciousness and manifests itself in many ways.

The section in the 2002 Cuban census addressing race reveals that data were intentionally manipulated to make it look as though most of the population is white. According to this national study, non-white Cubans comprised only between 30-35% of it, which is impossible to believe. One needs only to walk any street in Cuba to see that the statistic was altered.

One possible reason for this numerical manipulation might be an attempted redefinition as white of those with less dark skin, in a desire to be part of a race that controls aesthetic values and is more likely to scale the social ladder. Unofficial surveys have garnered more reliable figures that show that the black and *mestizo* population is at about 50-60%.



It is lamentable that we still have to talk about a subject that continues to reflect its deeply rooted nature at this stage of a revolutionary process that promised to abolish racial discrimination. Among the pernicious effects of this scourge are its devastating psychological and sociological effects on ample parts of the black-looking population.

While we can talk about *apartheid*-style segregation in Cuba, it is important to point out that Cubans who are euphemistically called “people of color” have fewer opportunities to get ahead within established frameworks—with regard to jobs, professional advancement, representation in the media, better housing conditions, and other areas inherent to essential human development.

It is not the case that these goals are totally impossible but rather that they require greater effort to achieve. One should take into account that much of the energy invested in these efforts produces empty or costly victories, or much-talked-about frustrations.

Currently, 2,800 young Africans get educated in Cuban universities, and more than 35,000 have graduated in the past four decades. Yet, this is no reason to ignore realities that slowly have been corrupting our social fabric and producing long-lasting consequences. More black Cuban families live in deteriorated housing than any others; blacks represent more of the Cuban prison population, which is at 70,000, than any other group; and, it is blacks who most often bear the brunt of jokes in which they always come out badly. These and many other realities highlight the inequality and rejection they suffer.

The forgotten nature of this problem has led to the existence of an ingrained racist attitude. Currently, the upper echelons are trying to patch up this situation. Yet, this is a much too complicated issue. In the meantime, stereotypes have become the norm and events that could well lead to a solution to this problem have been met with disapproval.

Racial discrimination in Cuba has some distinguishing characteristics. It might be difficult for someone who knows little or nothing about its particularities, or the historical factors that have contributed to our national identity, to understand and accept that there is any sort of racism on the island. To avoid being derailed by evidence and postures whose purpose it is to minimize the problem, or take attention off it, one needs to thoroughly study the situation's context and leave aside one's leanings or prejudices.

While it is true that there are now some venues at which the problem of racism can be discussed, this only happens under strict gov-

ernment supervision. Open participation and any opportunity to express doubts or questions that clash with this preconceived agenda are partly designed solely to foment a sensitivity that is useful for reinforcing the message to the outside world. The permitted publication of books on this subject, or as common even its superficial treatment on a television program, is no reason to celebrate.

What is truly important is the creation of an environment conducive to unrestricted analysis, and more frequent media coverage, to broadly raise consciousness about the issue.

Highly complex, ideological constraints on strictly controlled communications in Cuba make it very difficult to imagine scenarios that could facilitate a broad discussion that does not include police agents posing as intellectuals or as common citizens, or lists of prohibited topics and the names of people who need to be kept in line.

Skeptics and those who vehemently reject affirmations that there is racially motivated discrimination in Cuba should see the documentary "Raza" [Race] (2008), directed by Eric M. Corvalán Pellé, and produced by Caminos (Martin Luther King, Jr. Memorial Center). In it they will find the opinions of mostly black, Cuban intellectuals and artists, and Fernando Rojas, the Vice Minister of Culture. Despite their differing views, they all accept that the problem of racial discrimination is real. The film was quickly made unavailable, no doubt by order of the Cuban Institute of Art and Film (ICAIC), which controls this sector, and it became nearly impossible to see it. Nevertheless, there are clandestine, DVD copies of it in circulation, and one can see it on a flash drive.

The African-American intellectuals who signed the document that went round the world on December 1st of last year, will not have to regret their actions. The Cuban revolu-



tion has failed in its goal of justice and equality for all, even if the elite insists upon denying this fact.

It is plausible that thousands of black Cubans study myriad professions at Cuban universities. No one can deny the government's educational efforts in a continent scarred by poverty and illiteracy, but the political underpinnings of these gestures outweigh the substance of what comes framed as philanthropy.

The ghost of discrimination still haunts Cuba from within. Thousands of black citizens have to figure out a way to survive soul-destroying circumstances. The very same mindset established by the colonizers of centuries past persists among a predominantly, white elite, who has refused to give the issue the serious attention it merits. It is on the bottom of their priority list. Now it's trying to assuage the situation, to keep up appearances.

While appearing in the aforementioned documentary, Cuban musician Gerardo

Alfonso shares the following reasons for alarm: "I think silence is worse. I believe that the more we allow days to go by, minutes to go by and we are not talking about this, the more the deeply-rooted, fermenting, underground racism will continue to rot our entire nation. This could possibly fester to a point at which there will be an explosion."

For her part, Gisela Arandia, coordinator of the now disappeared *Color Cubano* organization who was also in the film, concludes: "Racism is an ideological weakness. It is a political conflict, and as such, is incompatible with social justice and incompatible with a search for equity."

Opinions like these shed light on a reality that threatens to further muddy the nation's destiny. Its accumulation of deficiencies is akin to a Gordian knot. Unraveling it without snapping the rope will be a very difficult task.