

In the Dark Zone

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Efforts on the part of island authorities to find a way to get Cubans to rediscover their traditional devotion to work, despite being rewarded with starvation wages, shortages, and severe restrictions on their citizens' rights in return, somewhat bring to mind the story of the philosopher Diogenes, when he was traveling through Athens in broad daylight with a lighted lamp, futilely searching for an honest man.

Cuba, however, is not Athens. In Cuba, honesty is far from disappearing. Instead, it seems that it is the authorities who have become somehow bankrupt, given their lack of will and the few resources they apply to creating, making viable, organizing, and encouraging honest work.

This problem seems to suggest that it is strongly connected to an increasing mistrust towards government on the part of black Cubans. This may not be the only reason but it is certainly high on the list. This also reveals the high degree of disillusionment that this population has experienced with a political system that they once gave their support, approbation, sweat, and blood.

A wise man once told us: "Cuba would not be Cuba without blacks."¹ Even now, it is also obvious that without them the success of the 1959 Cuban revolution would not have come about. It is also true that the consolidation of the government that ensued from it, which has for so long used and abused its power, would not have happened either.

The Cuban revolution has found it imperative to count on the support and participation of slave descendants for the purpose of sustaining itself. It has found the work of blacks crucial to its becoming a modern nation, and discovered in black Cubans its identity. It has even found crucial their presence on the battlefield, such as in the independence struggle against colonial Spain.

Rightly so, many pages of been written about the ingratitude and moral corruption with which white Cubans repaid the economic wellbeing that their black compatriots earned for them during Republican times, when Cuba was already independent. Their treatment of them was almost as cruel as that of the slave era. Despite however long ago or under what circumstances, even less is said about the iniquity with which blacks keep on being the poorest of Cubans, the most relegated and repressed, and the most irremediably trapped by hopelessness.

Not one single urban planning project developed by the revolutionary government would have been possible if not for the support of blacks. Yet, it is still they who almost exclusively inhabit tenement yards and blocks, and other unhealthy dives in the capital and other island cities. Blacks have always been in the majority amongst the troops that the government has sent to numerous, international, hostile actions. They are never missing from the ranks of those who aggressively compete in sports. The same is true of the prestige and influence of their cultural work, which is cur-

rently recognized world round as a mark of Cuban identity. Yet, this socio-racial group's constant lack of representation among the State's highest and most prestigious offices, historically and even now, is extremely noteworthy. Despite currently growing discontent and mistrust towards the government among blacks and *mestizos*, and the rest of the island's population, it is obvious that the government has historically seen slave descendants as its best, most believing, and patient supporters. Nonetheless, this unconditional backing was never rewarded with justice. Blacks and *mestizos* continue being those who are most harassed by the police and who most fill Cuban jails.

It might be going too far to say that the circumstances that allow this same situation to persist today are exactly the same as those that promoted racial discrimination in eras past. Yet, facts are facts, and what is immediately obvious about the current reality is that it is not too essentially different from the racist ideas of our history's worse moments. Francisco Frías y Jacott, a "highly regarded," nineteenth-century, Cuban thinker (and abolitionist, of course), bluntly and stupidly summarized this racism by saying of the "inferior races" (to which blacks belong, according to him):

"Since they lack ambition and initiative, have no means or precaution, nor even self-respect, and they aspire to nothing more than to quell their hunger or avoid punishment, they are more apt for use as purely mechanical instruments controlled by someone else. Molecule by molecule, they offer up their bodies in exchange for a daily ration, or to satisfy any other appetite expressive of their brutal instincts. Even his religious beliefs and acceptance of their inferiority predisposes them to suffer under the yoke of passive obedience and external control. In a word, they are devices

that function, to a certain degree, by virtue of what in mechanical engineering is called 'movement transmission.'"

Given the fact that there appears to be no reasonable relationship whatsoever between everything the black Cuban population has done for the revolutionary government and the way in which the latter has repaid it, isn't it possible to see this treatment akin to the kind those "mechanical devices" received earlier?" Isn't the opportunistic, vulgar manipulation of both discriminatory attitudes (that of centuries ago and now) totally lacking in the generosity and loyalty that has always characterized the descendants of Cuban slaves?

In addition to its lack of consideration and insensitivity, the worse thing is the plain old strategic clumsiness with which the government has been limiting the full access of blacks (and all poor people, or those who lack family in positions of power, which means blacks even more so) to employment and, consequently, to honest ways of earning money. This not only literally contradicts official rhetoric on the matter but is also unconstitutional.

In March 1959, from the very beginning of his ascent to power, Fidel Castro declared in a public speech: "the worse kind of racial discrimination was the sort that limited Cuban blacks access to sources of work."³ On the other hand, Article 43 of the first socialist Constitution, promulgated on February 24th, 1976, declared that Cubans, regardless of distinction, "all citizens, regardless of race, skin color, sex, religious belief, national origin and any situation that may be harmful to human dignity have access, in keeping with their merits and abilities, to all state, public administration, and production services positions and jobs..."⁴ Yet, this is not what we have seen in past decades, everytime the government has applied segregationist criteria like political suitability, or those concerning those nebulous

moral requirements, to one's ability to hold certain jobs.

This situation is a calamity that has been amply covered by the independent press in Cuba, as well as by the international media. Since it is a part of everyday life on the island, it is easily corroborated. Yet, if it were possible to discuss the matter in a bit more detail, that might suffice for exposing the tragedy of one, single, solitary man, who at this very moment is suffering from having been fired from his job for essentially segregationist reasons. His case is not an exception but rather just one of thousands, but the particulars of his case could serve to illuminate for us, if tenuously, that dark zone through which today's government seems to be blindly navigating, searching—like Diogenes with his lamp—for lost or misplaced honesty.

The Dark Zone

Modesto Cordero Azcuy, a forty-one year old, poor, lonely, vulnerable, black man from Havana, doesn't even have anyone or anything to protect him. With all of the country's unjust laws against him, and not even one single lawyer or institution that will dare represent him, he feels trapped by a system whose power is absolute, that controls everything, governs with an iron fist, and decided to fire him from his job as a stevedore. It not only did not consider his merits and abilities, or good work record, or his impeccable social conduct; it also ignored his long record of service to the revolutionary government itself.

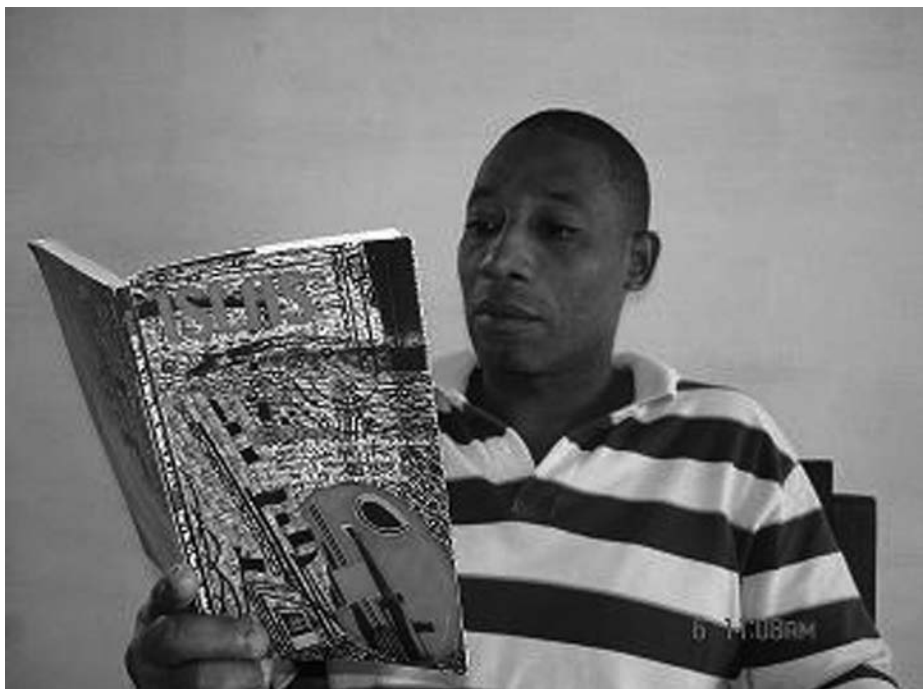
The reason that was given for firing him was not because they were downsizing or on account of poor performance on his part. Neither is it the case that he lacks the skills necessary to unload bales of recycled clothes. According to him, he was officially notified that his dismissal was due to the fact that he

had a friendly relationship with someone who did not support the government. As it happens, that person is his brother, who is currently trying to make arrangements to leave Cuba.

Were this anecdote not extremely serious and embarrassing, it might seem to be taken right out of one of those B comedies of intrigue that we often see on television. Last August, the director of his workplace (which is affiliated with PROVARI) called Modesto into his office to ask him if he hadn't had a legal problem. The reason for his query was that the Ministry of the Interior was disqualifying Modesto for work. He hadn't had trouble with the law, but immediately understood the nature of the problem. He explained to the director that the problem might be entirely due to the fact that his brother was making arrangements to leave for the United States, as a political refugee. Of course, Modesto was absolutely right.

A few days later, he was once again officially summoned to a meeting where he was explicitly informed by the head of Human Resources that they had decided to fire him because no one with connections to people with anti-revolutionary ideas, or to those who want to leave Cuba to live in another country, can work for PROVARI. Since then, Modesto, hopeless and without support, has fruitlessly wasted time in a series of efforts to demand his rights as a worker. What possible hope can someone who has been designated as no longer qualifying as a stevedore have?

All his appeals to the Ministry of the Interior garnered him was indolent, evasive silence. He was once again summoned to his workplace, where the decision to fire him was not only ratified but now also explained as a decision by a company commission, at the national level (and not by the Ministry of the Interior, as he had been told earlier). The representative from the Central de Trabajadores de



Modesto Cordero Azcuy. Havana

Cuba (CTC) [Cuban Workers Federation], the island's only legal labor union (of which Modesto is formally a member), made no attempt whatsoever to defend or protect Modesto. On the contrary, she refused to give the union member a letter containing an evaluation of his work. Modesto insists that she was obeying orders from the head of Human Resources.

In the end, once his precarious possibility of making any demands were exhausted, this man, who not only lost the only honest way to support himself and his family, has also lost any last bit of faith he still had in the revolution: "I feel really bad," he told *ISLAS*, "for having devoted my entire youth to defending—even using weapons—a system that uses us, exploits us, and demands limitless sacrifices and loyalty of us, but for which we mean very little as human beings. It takes only one day of not doing things exactly as they say for you to fall in disgrace."

This was not the first time that Modesto Cordero Azcuy had personally experienced exclusion. But he confesses that he has always tried to motivate himself to accept the idea that it was specific people in the system, and not the entire system itself, that made possible the frequent abuses and violations of rights that he witnessed. Not even in 1998, when he discovered that the boss at his place of employment, at the Wajay Free Trade Zone Employment Agency, had decided to fire him because, as he said, "we've got to get this black guy out of here," was Modesto dissuaded from his support for the revolution.

Modesto was born into a humble family that committed itself to collectively and unswervingly supporting the self-defined, socialist system during the revolutionary 'avalanche' of 1968. He has never known any other government system other than the current one, with its totalitarian control over all of the island's institutions. The men who lead these,

all of them representatives of the same government, are the ones who make decisions for him, without ever consulting him, and impose upon him rigid rules about what he should think and how he should act at all times in order not to be considered an enemy, and begin being mistreated with absolute impunity.

“That is how I grew up and have always lived,”he adds, by way of a conclusion,“believing everything the Cuban newspapers or televi-

sion told me, and trying to find ways to justify things when I realized that reality seemed to increasingly contradict official rhetoric. But I can’t take it anymore. It took me a while, but I finally managed to take the blindfold off. I feel like I was duped, used, and betrayed. The worse thing is that I may have discovered this too late, because I see no way out of the predicament I am now in.”

Notes:

1- Ortiz, Fernando. “Por la integración cubana de blancos y negros,”in *Los mejores ensayistas cubanos* [compilación de Salvador Bueno] (La Habana: Segundo Festival del Libro Cubano, 1959: 38).

2- Frías y Jacott, Francisco. “Son causas morales, no físicas, las que principalmente alejan al hombre blanco de la agricultura tropical,”in *Pensamiento Cubano, Siglo XIX I* [compilación de Isabel Monal y Olivia Miranda] (La Habana: Ciencias Sociales, 2002): 497.

3- Castro, Fidel. “Discurso en la concentración popular en el Palacio Presidencial,”in *Hoy* (24 de marzo de 1959): 6.

4- Serviat, Pedro. *El problema negro en Cuba y su solución definitiva* (La Habana: Editora Política, 1986): 163-164.