

You Must Ask Yourself Why We Fight

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If Juan Antonio Madrazo Luna were not an internationally renowned, civic leader, he might be serving an unjust sentence while you are reading this article, like tens of thousands of other innocents who fill hundreds of Cuban prisons.

Despite their everyday and common nature, the facts and circumstances are still extremely worrisome. On the morning of November 13th, 2009, a plainclothes policeman stopped Madrazo Luna on a Havana street in yet one more, almost historically, folkloric raid or sweep, the sort that popular humor has dubbed “operation black hunt,” because of their unashamedly racist nature.

After he identified himself, the officer proceeded to accuse him of being a common street thief, arguing that he had the phenotypical traits of a criminal, with absolutely no evidence whatsoever. The young activist, for his part, showed him his identity papers and vehemently protested the absurd and arbitrary accusation. This was enough for the agent to conclude that Madrazo Luna was going to physically attack him, which got the suspect taken to the nearest police station charged with assault.

At the same time as his family members, friends, and colleagues waited uselessly for police officials to be seen, Madrazo Luna was beginning to suffer the threats and pressures that all charged Cuban and arrestees normally face. Meanwhile, an intense, international campaign to condemn this act, show solidarity with him, and support this peaceful warrior, this victim of an unjust reprisal, was rapidly taking shape.

As one might expect, the political police burst onto the scene just a few hours later and resolved the incident, in order to save governmental authorities

from major embarrassment and discredit in the international sphere. Yet, this did not happen before they were able to dole out their share of cowardly intimidation. By mid-afternoon, media responses and shows of solidarity from all around the world began to pour in via telephone calls, without one single member of the foreign or independent press being present. Finally, the half dozen or so family members, and colleagues, myself included, were able to leave the police station with our brother free of charges.

That is how the incident in which we found ourselves involved concluded, but not so the sad saga of the arbitrariness and injustices to which Cuban pedestrians, especially young black men, are subjected. Having no guarantees or protection, they risk becoming victims of the arrogance and impunity of police authorities who devote themselves to repressing innocents with disproportionate accusations and sentences instead of keeping the peace. Given the lack of any institutional or legal mechanism to discourage or combat such practices, one must additionally take into account the brutality and abuse that is perpetrated by police officers or prison guards.

The intrinsic racism of the governing elite becomes a methodological principle that turns each young black man into a potential criminal solely because of his phenotype. The “measure of pre-criminal dangerousness,” and the accusations of contempt and assault that are used against those who dare protest the everyday arbitrariness of the police, have deprived many young and anonymous innocents of their freedom. These are men who will have to face a dure experience in the penitentiary—

a place where abuse of authority and corruption are their bitter daily bread and human dignity has little value.

Since neither the “Revolutionary National Police” nor the judicial system is immune to the spiraling corruption that degrades Cuban society, it is not hard for established, common criminals to negotiate with public peace officers or, ultimately pay a good price to avoid the penal process. Meanwhile, many defenseless citizens are repressed because of attitudes, actions, and behaviors that nowhere in the Western world are considered criminal.

The racist tendencies and practices of the Cuban police so complicate the street presence of Cuban blacks, who are often questioned in a number of generally closed and supervised spaces for intellectual debate. Thus far, these discussion and protests have been limited to the narrow contours of elitist inquiries. While present at the only debate of this sort at which I have been able to speak, I reiterated that the problem was easy to solve: the police should act only when the offender is caught red-handed, or when his or her crime is a proven fact, and not be guided by people’s physical characteristics.

The authorities, media, and official press (the only one allowed) have not changed. They do not give this reality, which so complicates our coexistence, the attention it deserves. It seems that it is too difficult for Cuba’s leaders to disabuse themselves of the racist patterns that for centuries have shaped this nation’s downfalls. They also refuse to reject the mechanisms of terror that are used to guarantee control and dominion over all society.

This institutionalized arbitrariness and complicit silence contrast with the concern shown by

journalist Juana Carrasco in her article “Under reasonable suspicion, the police state” (*Juventud Rebelde*, 11 October, 2009). In this article, the cloak of indignation is rent by the discriminatory connotation of a police practice known as “stop and search,” which is used by police forces in a number of large U.S. cities for the purpose of reducing crime.

This journalist bases her article on an Associated Press cable containing testimonies and opinions on the matter. A justice-loving defender of ethnic minority rights in the United States, this official spokeswoman shared data about innocent, African-American and Hispanic victims who were stopped for reasons of “reasonable suspicion” from a 1968, U.S. Supreme Court decision. Carrasco finally expresses disquiet “because it is almost impossible for civil or human rights’ entities and organizations to research this problem, one that illustrates the police-like nature of a state that still enforces persecutory laws and extreme vigilance.”

This enormous display of cynicism and dual morality hardly deserves discussion, because we Cubans are accustomed to the sort of self-interested, frontier hypercriticism that drives the island’s leaders and their spokespersons to pronounce doubts and evaluations about realities foreign to them while concomitantly abstaining from admitting their own guilt and assuming blame for many of the problems that assail us and are not even aired anywhere though social debates and public opinion.

Injustice should be reason for concern and worry anywhere it happens, but it is not acceptable that Cuba’s government present itself as the international champion of rights and foreign integrity when so many Cubans continue to be subjected to arbitrariness and neglect.