

# The UMAP: The New Early Racism?

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**T**he more I examine the phenomenon of racism, the clearer the concept gets: racism is any practice or ideology that attempts to justify superiority and, consequently, a hierarchy and dominance of certain human groups over others based on traits, worldviews, and cultural practices that differentiate human diversity.

This concept emerges as a result of perceived ethnic differences and biological traits amongst the races. Although racism can only result when ethnic and biological differences are overt, any pretension of superiority, since its very inception, has had more to do with profound cultural differences than with ethnic distinctiveness, skin color, and other evident differences amongst the races.

The struggle against racism began being successful when it got beyond the limited nature of the concept itself. The situation of the Hutus and Tutsis serves as an excellent example of how to understand this phenomenon. There was racism between the two groups, despite the fact both Rwandan ethnic groups are black and Nazism was a form of racism practiced against people who were also Caucasians.

Now deceased French philosopher Michel Foucault defined the notion of racism as being based upon physical traits and cultural prac-

tices. Jews were and are still victims of a form of racism that whites used quite effectively against them. Of course, what is confusing about the etymological origin of a word like 'racism' is that it means much more than just its biological and morphological definition. Despite this fact, the fight against racism neglects this essential detail, something that condemns to failure any anti-racist project.

It is fundamentally true that there are biological differences between blacks and whites. Yet, what is truly important is whether or not those differences justify discrimination and are enough on their own to have served as the base upon which to build so long-lived a racist construct.

Culture provides an explanation for an ideology of disdain, and for discrimination amongst different groups of humans. This notion allows me to now discuss the *Unidades Militares de Ayuda a la Producción* (UMAP) [Military Units to Aid Production (MUAP)], and examine them as an expression of new forms of discrimination that existed early on during the revolutionary process, and were just a continuation of historical racism against blacks and *mestizos*.

The UMAP was created on November 26<sup>th</sup>, 1965, and discontinued on June 30<sup>th</sup>, 1968. Those three years painfully marked the

lives of 20,000, mostly young Cubans, whose most prized dreams were dashed when they were brutally recruited to join work details doing forced labor.

The Cuban government has not revealed details about this experience, not even when the intention is to revitalize one of the groups that has most suffered on account of that policy: homosexuals. The reason this part of the past has been covered up lies in the terrible nature of the memory that still exists regarding the brutality that characterized recruitment into and confinement within the UMAP. We know this because of the existence of numerous testimonies by former victims of this system.

The purpose of the UMAP is revealing. According to the government, the idea was to reeducate those young people who did not fit the image of a fervent revolutionary. Who were these young people? Members of what were already called minority groups whose contemporaries in France, Sweden, Argentina, and the United States were promoting a cultural change whose effects are still being felt. They were homosexuals, hippies, religious people—members of minority or majority groups, depending on how you count—who preserved cultural traits, worldviews, and ritual practices that fully and openly contradicted “new behaviors” and new social views that the Cuban government intended to establish on the island.

If we were not influenced by May 1968, this is explained by the fact that those Cubans who participated in this movement had already, previously been incarcerated in an UMAP. This policy, which was short-lived (although not short enough for its victims), set the stage for later, marginalizing policies. As one of the most often deployed racist practices, it shut up in repressive and self-repressed ghettoes groups that shared specific rituals, ideas, symbols, and practices.

Whether at universities, workplaces, communities, or in their own environments, these people were condemned to decades of the kind of ostracism that those who are discriminated against must endure. Their fate was just like that of blacks who were not able to reject their religious practices, and preserved their more or less intact past.

It is true that not only racially mistreated minorities went to UMAPs. Non-conformists, rebels with or without a cause, intellectuals whose work was “dubious,” people who did not want to work or who refused to serve in the military also filled the ranks of those in UMAPs. Thus, the UMAP represented a blend of cultural and ideological intolerance that shocked the world more for its politically repressive nature, and the humiliation it caused its victims, than because of the political principles and racist practices behind them.

The testimonies on this subject are quite unequivocal. Degradation and denigration, mistreatment and insult characterized this sad, pained, marked, furious, and nakedly frustrating chapter for those who were considered the bad guys on the newly established scene.

In the UMAP, one could find confessed criminals next to former directors of Cubana de Aviación, homosexuals, Christians, seminary students, and Jehovah’s Witnesses. As regards this last group, whose social conduct was impeccable, they were characterized as a social scourge and seen in this manner by a large part of society.

Hidden and expeditious proceedings are another way in which the UMAP’s activities were kept in obscurity. Some young men were called to military service but could never have imagined their true fate. They often could not even notify their families that they were being taken. Others were taken out of their workplaces and transferred to distant regions, as in the case of those from Havana who were taken

to Camagüey, principal headquarters for the UMAP's bases.

The official press publicized the political urgency and educational purpose of the project. On Thursday, April 14<sup>th</sup>, 1966, *Granma* published an article by Luis Báez, who in one of his most illuminating passages wrote: "The U.M.A.P. is not a place for punishment. The young people who are interned there are not seen with disdain. On the contrary, they are well received. They are subject to military discipline. They are well treated and encouraged to improve their attitude, to change, to learn. The intention is to turn them into men who are useful to society. When the first of these groups arrived, they were no good, and certain officials did not have the patience or experience necessary, and they went too far."

Military discipline, attitude improvement, change, learning, and becoming useful are precisely the tools used for the cultural brainwashing of minority ideas, rituals, and practices that cannot be comfortably channeled to serve a new pedagogy meant to produce a new cultural model. This could be achieved through force, via military discipline, or the punishment of those "first groups that were no good," or through schooling and other cultural spaces designed to control those who are pure.

Even if Luis Báez is not qualified to describe the real suffering that real people endured in real places, as could the true victims of that drama, his description more than suffices to reveal the coldness of a project that was imagined and executed strictly according to a racist view that did not allow for the existence of certain groups with their own practices and preferences, but rather did allow for a unique sort of human being designed to satisfy interests other than his or her own. That is what the UMAP was: brutal evidence of the new kinds of racism that became institutionalized in 1959 and were later well integrated into the Cuban revolution's labor, cultural, and ideological policies: policies that were intolerant of minorities, or of those groups that were considered as such: blacks, homosexuals, strange people—be they mystics or practitioners of strange religions that cannot be controlled by the State.

Today, these minorities are reintegrating into society. This is a form of cultural revenge against the UMAP. It promises to help in the fight against all kinds of racism—old and new—like the kind that can be perceived in the use in Cuba of the word *palestinos* [Palestineans] to describe certain social groups.