

Cuban African Descendants: Poverty by Decree

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The impoverishment of Cuba's African descendants is a history of counter-emancipation in Cuba that with few exceptions has not been written autonomously. There is an intra-history of Hispanic descendancy that coincides with the history of colonization, and then with the island's invented history, but there is no way to get the black world to coincide with that history that has been written in capital letters, except to explain the formation and development of white, hegemonic culture. African descendants have lacked a historiography that studies more ethnographic than anthropological measure our academic memory.

The study of African descendants only begins to become more independent in its current form—sociocultural studies—as we know them. First, it was criminal sociology and then it was ethnography that began to venture into understanding different behaviors and cultural norms, but they did not delve into other social dynamics such as those in political, social or economic processes in Afro-Cuban social history, which itself was resulting from the dynamic interaction with Hispanic descendant culture, and within the historical process, itself.

The gaze at the black world is structured solely from a subordinate and subjected position—as an object, which never allows one to see the interaction within, a given with any social dynamic. It is simply a reaction to ambient situations. That narrow and lofty angle does not allow one to distinguish the creative options and social mimesis that make African descendants dynamic and convert them into proper subjects in a possible history. They are understood and explained only as objects of another history, one in which they either accept their new role, or react to an intolerable situation like slavery, or alienate themselves within ritual reproduction and sociological criminality.

This makes subalternity not only real but also a constructed, imaginary focus and position. A focus that hides that other real history that is coming clearly into view from the depths of subalternity to reveal that African descendants are not only in the midst of a social rebellion but also creating options for an alternative history of Cuba that does not need to provide counterevidence to prove it is possible. Cuba's history of *counter-emancipation* does not begin with the hegemonic *criollo* elite's social and political action. Instead, it begins with the story this elite's action makes

of the social reality of others, something that is happening right under its nose. The story is in the principle, one might say.

The first time anyone ever began to tell the social and economic history of Afro-Cubans in Cuba it was José Antonio Saco, with his *vade mecum* about vagrancy. Havana's slackers are not blacks or *mestizos*, but whites who hate any kind of work or business that take self-direction and effort to be as awful as having to wash one's hands after laboring. Saco aptly describes how the majority of what we would call the lower middle class is comprised of free blacks and *mulatos*, those far removed from having any lineage that kept white *criollos* from putting on an apron or cutting out a pattern for a handmade suit. We are talking about the eighteenth century.

Saquetemío, as a famous history professor at my university used to call him, was frightened by the reality that was taking shape in Cuba's social structure, different from the one he and everyone then and after assumed would exist every since plantation times. This makes me wonder if such a black, Cuban, economic history was actually impossible before the invention of ethnography and cultural anthropology, with their Hegelian way of looking at people who "lacked a history."

This way of writing an economic history of blacks in Cuba comes to an end in order to focus entirely on historiographical efforts to narrate and analyze the history of black Cubans in the Cuban economy. This makes it absolutely essential to document the history of slavery as the structural foundation of said economy, and as the social foundation of all white, *criollo* wealth. In this sense, narrative history becomes subordinated to the designs of society's hegemonic groups, and makes invisible that part of social reality that does not fit within dominant models.

Inevitably, the economic base of the Cuban sugar elite was the exploitation of slave labor. After the Haitian Revolution, the slave trade developed according to the needs of a sugar industry that became the exclusive pillar of Cuba's viability as a nation within the global economy. It is natural that this narrative follows primary history and focuses on the fundamental relationships produced between differing social sectors engaged in some way with the slavery/sugar industry duo.

Another point is that this foundation story became the only version of history. If it is impossible for someone to seriously support the notion that a country's basic social structure conditions the history of this fundamental conflicts, then neither is it possible to assert that the original sociological situation of one group's condition defines its future social development. There were not even the sharpest of political conflicts between slaves and slave owners. Neither did conditions for social groups leaving Cuba negatively impact their later options—not for blacks or whites.

Cuba was so well positioned in the whirlwind of modernity, both during its colonial period and its republican one, that there was always constant mobility on the island. This did bring about a natural reordering and social connections within a fluid society.

Yet, for conservative and progressive traditional narratives, possible options for blacks in Cuba depended exclusively on that original condition, starting with slavery. This causes a fatal binary situation: either a repeat of the Haitian Revolution on Cuban soil, or the social emancipation of the anti-capitalist revolution. The bourgeois or middle class black is not only a social rarity, which might be true depending on the historical period one is examining, but also an inconceivable and therefore, unnatural premise within the

criollo version of Cuban history. It is a story about the past and a story yet to be written, from both sides of the ideological map.

In historical and cultural terms, the exaggerated myth that has fostered a fear of blacks, born from the example of the Haitian Revolution, efficiently masks the hidden fear of competition of blacks as economic subjects. Today we might call it fear of business competition. By the end of the eighteenth century, and the first forty years of the nineteenth, the frequency with which blacks are involved in independent economic activity is much more demonstrable than the fact that blacks might lean towards violent rebellion against slavery.

The development of ethnography hid or covered up an important part of black social history and allowed for the establishment of a myth of blacks as uncivilized subjects in the nation's imagination. They were considered capable only of pagan rituals, the lowest of criminal behavior, senseless, purposeless violence and idle folklore focused on bodies and their flexibility. Furthermore, what interests us here is that the myth also portrayed blacks as ontologically poor. Thus, Fernando Ortiz did a good job of advancing an understanding of racial differences, establishing an undeniable foundation for literature, but José Antonio Saco offered the necessary clues to situate Afro-Cubans in a modern context, and scrutinize the answers and the ability to face the challenges of involuntary modernization. Unwittingly, as a historical source, Saco's argument is still the best for studying blacks as totally modern, economic subjects.

Why did the national narrative make ethnographic narratives possible, and undo the social narrative that came before it by more than a century? Answer: it was convenient for the *criollo* elite to anchor blacks to a pre-mod-

ern imaginary as an ideological premise of its social hegemony. *Criollos* trample on history not because their social hegemony is secured, but because they construct a forced hegemony anchored in cultural difference.

For me, this results in two hypotheses. The first has two parts. One: the Cuban middle class today would have to be fundamentally black and mulatto; the other, this middle class would be the result of a necessary coexistence back then in what would have been a marginal service economy. This would have led to the creation of what were called family-style guilds in the Middle Ages. The second hypothesis is that the structural poverty of blacks creates a racist disdain that always refused to allow for the creation of the economic foundations for black emancipation within the median, urban economy. As a result, black Cubans are poor by mandate.

The initial mandate and *criollo* model for the political construction of black poverty go back to July 1513. The Catholic Monarchs issued a Royal Decree: "so his vassals become enthused about participating in the discovery and populating of the Indies and be able to live in the comfort they desired, is was their will that houses, plots, acres and peons be distributed to all who went to populate the new lands and places, and that once they would have resided in those towns for four years, they would be given the ability to sell this property as their own, from that time forward."¹

According to a letter by Fray Nicolás de Ovando to the Spanish monarch, by 1513 there were black people in Cuba but, of course, they could not take advantage of this Royal Decree. This quotation does not really satisfy a historiographical naïveté that wants to institute and judge a particular, retrospective justice. The quote is fundamental for another reason: the State origin of Cuba's

economic structure, and the subsequent social positioning of Cuba's diverse sectors, even today.

Independently of social models—let's say capitalism or socialism—economic participation in our country is designated by the State. It is not just strictly a matter of political power, but rather of racial access to the State. This is what has defined the country's socio-economic structure. It is also an archaic way of assigning resources similar to how it was done in mercantile and medieval societies, and result in increasing impoverishment and debasement because of its racist tone, as in our own case.

This process of appropriation and distribution of land ended officially in 1729. Later one, and all throughout the two next centuries, it still existed as a process of reordering and redistribution among landowners politically designated within the society of Spanish descendants. This ensured the establishment of a racially based economic structure, which itself created a cultural cycle that reproduced a kind of political economy for which the social situation did not necessarily depend on the development of economic actors, but rather, essentially, to which race one belonged.

That economic policy, born of an earlier, monarchically defined social structure, prepared the way for an enormous ethnic cleansing within the economic scene that started with the repression of the Escalera Conspiracy in 1844. The free black and mulatto middle class, which came into being at the end of the eighteenth and first thirty years of the nineteenth century, was pulverized with a clear purpose to destroy the economic foundations of racial self-emanicipation. There was already a precedent whose doubly charged, demonstrative symbolism was doubly dangerous for the security of the His-

panic model: José Antonio Aponte, whose head was hung in city-center, in 1812, to instill fear. He was a mulatto artisan. Thus, raciality and economics came together in a delicate union to show, from below, from the modernity and different, the origin of *criollo* hegemony and domination.

According to historian Alberto Arredondo, there were only three black lawyers, ten black doctors and twenty-nine black dentists in 1899. This is not because of the economic model, but rather the cultural underpinnings of the political model. In an open, flexible and fluid economic system, there was no obstacle to blacks and *mestizos* (not slaves) ascending within a society that was permanently opening up to a model that today we call a service economy, despite the archaic nature of its elite. No obstacle except racism that is.

In this sense, racism has a fundamental connotation for the entire, Cuban, nation-building project that goes beyond its ethnic impact: an imbalance between an ascending, modern economy and a culturally regressive political elite. This imbalance is rare in the Western hemisphere because Cuba was the only country where the elite committed financial suicide with its own economic conquests. The reason for this has nothing to do with the social fissures present in the accelerated but unequal economic growth that was being experienced. Instead, it concerns cultural endogamy of the Hispanic elite's political environment. As in any other country, this endogamy led to only one thing: an oligarchy and concomitant authoritarianism. Why does a formally liberal nation have a power authoritarian streak? It is because of an endogamy that totally limited the social circulation of difference in the economic sphere.

It is strange but logical that the first republic's liberal party started with a strong,

black, social base. This is an interesting political and cultural phenomenon. But then it lost it somewhere along its political trajectory. When the popular socialist (communist) party inherits this social base, it takes in the product of a politically provoked, ethnic impoverishment in an extra-economic environment: society's cultural norms.

The most illustrative example of the mandate of poverty is the prohibition on blacks and *mestizos* working in commerce. If in 1919, when the economic crisis affected primarily Hispanic descendants, the number of black bricklayers is still greater than that of Cuban and Spanish whites together, and the number of black carpenters is much higher than that of Cuban whites. By 1920 the tendency begins to reverse, when third generation Spanish participate in programmed immigration, and they begin to get involved in businesses and other economic activities, and begin to displace and prevent the participation of black Cubans.

In his book *El pensamiento filosófico de José Martí* (1946), Ángel César Pinto Albiol, a Marxist-sympathizer, period commentator acknowledges that there were rich blacks and *mulatos* in Cuba during the republican era, just as during the colonial era there were mulattoes who owned slaves. Pinto Albiol should have produced a better documented book with information about the number, composition, economic activities and identities of these families (of course, there weren't too many), but he preferred creating something more akin to a work of propaganda, instead of a more rigorous one, particularly considering the topic's political importance. With Pedro Deschamps Chapeaux, and his *El negro en la economía cubana* (1970), we are no better informed, despite the fact he displays a more creative interest in history. Only recently do we

see a profound, documented and convincing text from a sociological point of view. It is an analysis of the black middle classes in Cuba, by Iván César Martínez, a black, Cuban, ex-diplomat residing in Jamaica.

From José Antonio Saco to Iván César Martínez, we find very rich material that can be explored to arrive at important conclusions regarding the economy of blacks in Cuba. The most fundamental of this work reveals to us that ethno-racial inequality has its origin in a cultural model that regulates the distribution of economic resources via political ordering. It was not slavery that predetermined the future economic options of black Cubans, nor capitalism that anticipated their proletarianization. The fate of black Cubans—meaning their destiny—as slaves, ended with the end of slavery. That slavery survived as a socio-cultural phenomenon in the minds of its former victims had nothing to do with economic reality. At the beginning of the twentieth century, the richest *criollos* were not former slave owners. Similarly, the disadvantages that having been slaves not quite a decade earlier did not make it impossible for those who were freed to leave extreme poverty for the new labor market. They were not able to do this because they had a different skin color.

In its modern economy, which Cuba has had since the second half of the nineteenth century, a society's wealth is not necessarily linked to the economic fortunes of a particular class or sector. An empire does not create the prosperity of a nation: on the contrary. Spain should have been the wealthiest colonial power of all times. A nation can prosper independently of its past if it manages to insert itself in the structural changes that come about in the economy, and assume its logic. This makes me think that the economy is not a fixed bit of data, like an aristocratic title one

is given or earned for life. This mobility affects social classes and sectors in a definite way.

In considering a modern economy, we know that there are no guarantees regarding social situations and place—not in a good or bad way: Unless extra-economic reasons force reality in an attempt to accurately document social group membership as socioeconomic data of some sort. This is what happened with blacks in Cuba: their impoverishment was and continues to be tied to something worse than the imbalance of a political model: they are trapped in cultural debasement.

Many slaves and ex-slaves showed in the economic sphere what Quintín Banderas demonstrated as a military leader: an ability to distinguish one's self. Yet, what happened to the latter is a strong historical symbol of a sociological model that dates back to 1844. Quintín Banderas ends up being a general, yet he was offered a job as a doorman when the republic takes off. His fate is a perfect metaphor for the *criollo* pact, which by this time could not be written like a Royal Decree, from 1513. Yet its spirit invaded the nation at the republic's birth, despite the text that brought about the nation—a constitution. In any case, and in terms of its public effect, the Royal Decree by which land was distributed to *criollos* in the sixteenth century did not specifically exclude blacks. By the beginning of the first half of twentieth century, what happened mirrored what had happened during the first half of the nineteenth century, except that it happened through violence: a social readjustment not connected at all to its economic potential. They are given a place by interdiction, as happened with many commercial activities, by marginalizing public service or, once again by new violence, as in 1912.

The rest of the twentieth century took care of the social and cultural refinement of

the cultural norm of impoverishment, which should not be confused with poverty. It is also a psychological state resulting from a cultural and political mandate, to the point that there is currently no chronicle, story, vignette or report—at a time when a lot of history is being rewritten—that tell us about the Piedrahita family in Havana, one of the wealthiest families in the city, or about the countless prosperous, black families of Guantánamó, who were in that position by and before 1959.

I will stop here. It would not be serious to talk about the Cuban economy after 1959. Cuba was and still is an enclave economy that is externally assisted on a special, geopolitical game board. It lacks endogenous development that can be economically analyzed with precision. In fact, if we must adopt a strong revisionist impulse, we could justify this because we need to profoundly reevaluate Cuba's economic history during the second half of the twentieth century, both in terms of satisfying demands and what it actually is, conceptually and to itself—an economic demand: that spoke around which the modern economy spins, which gives meaning to its essential categories: productivity, investment and technological innovation.

To the effects of that work I would add only that a regressive process regarding social models and mobility reinforces the mandate for black poverty. Starting in 1959, Cuban society does not divide itself according to differences created by a social game. Instead, access privileges given by and from the political sector are conferred. This is a case of a medieval society that upon collapsing resulted in the marginalization and marginality of an asset-stripped, African descendant population with a mentality of poverty—like modern day untouchables—which still persists in current economic definitions.

Impoverishment is no longer the worse thing. Instead, it is that black Cubans have no place in Cuba as economic subjects, unless a profound structural reform takes place. How can one have access to economic power without having had a form of prior access shaped by family ties, to the political and administrative bureaucracy that redistributes new parcels within the old economy, if there is no new economy because this prevents the automatic generation of a democracy of wellbeing? In the current economic situation, how does one create small businesses without initial, real and financial capital that comes only through family finances and developable spaces that are inherited or acquired in the market? Finally, how can one insert one's self in this economy

with the legal acknowledgment of a vigorous informal industry that was traditionally established and survives badly in marginal suburbs, where the majority of black Cubans live?

In Cuba, economic mercantilism has been wellbeing's core for rancid, white racism. Paradoxically, the market economy is the black community's best ally, the Appian Way to delegitimizing the racist mandate of poverty for *others*, for those different people brought from Africa.

Note:

1-Pinto Albiol, Ángel César. *El pensamiento filosófico de José Martí* (La Habana, 1946): p. 118.