

The Black and Mass Media Equality

Armando Añel
Writer and Journalist

The essence of the Cuban Revolution is attractively presented through mass media. Some of the strongest means of persuasion of the Cuban Revolution are represented positively in the media, that is, their objective is to carry out a propaganda strategy primarily represented through mass media. Since Fidel Castro's ascension to power in January 1959, one can say that, even before then, castroism surrounded itself with a media not only sustained by the vanguard image of its chief governmental representatives (long hair, grown beard, ease of language, the poses, the amulets...), but also by its rhetoric. A speech that obtains its greatest benefits in the promise of equality: education for all, medicine for all, and sports for all. In this context, the promise that racial discrimination would be removed from the republican plan of action played a very important role in the government's rhetoric.

Although, curiously, the revolution against the Batista dictatorship did not lack racist components, for instance, segments of the white bourgeois supported castroism, because they opposed black interference in the affairs of State. Fulgencio Batista, a

mulatto, whose triumphant regiment sold itself as a defending force or promoter of racial equality in Cuba represented this interference. From the rise of the totalitarian artistic kingdom of Nicolas Guillen, the black poet who was reconverted into a national poet, to the multimedia advertising of national and international black figures, there were various signs that flirted with Cuba's image, a nation that finally resolved its social issues related to racial mixture. It appeared that Castro's project of accomplishing racial equality was as serious as his project of accomplishing social equality. This was a serious effort that was enhanced by the exodus of the middle and professional classes, primarily whites, from the country and the gradual aging of historical leaders of the revolution. Nevertheless, shining the spotlight on racial equality in Cuba did not succeed in coming across as anything more than a weak attempt, in which the black man never has a leading role.

Regarding Statistics

Given the fact that one of the promises of the Cuban Revolution was to end racism and

that there was statistically significant growth of black and racially mixed populations over the past fifty years, it is unacceptable that the black man does not have a greater presence in all of the important positions of the media and the government. The black and racially mixed populations are treated as one and the same in this article. In order to understand all of the dimensions of black drama in today's Cuba we must respond to data, not always verifiable, but undoubtedly in sync with all reports of the growth of the black and racially-mixed populations in recent times. However, one must take into account the overall expectations set in previous decades by the regime that was in power.

Several studies, based on the Population and Housing Census of 1981, confirm that whites represent about 60 percent or more of the total Cuban population, while the black and racially-mixed populations combined, represents the remaining 40 percent. However, such numbers, although official, do not reflect the reality of the racial composition of Cuba for several reasons. First, the numbers refer to a statistic acquired more than a quarter of a century ago. Second, as Jesus Guanche states in his essay, The racial issue in the current Cuba: Some considerations, “the instrument of observation, the national poll, self-limited the indexes to epithelial classifications, just as the taxonomic congruence of its denominations (...), the interviewers or those who applied the poll were not educated in physical anthropology as to distinguish

between phenotypes, and the classification of the phenotype was dependent on the self image of the interviewee...”. In this sense, it's probable that, when considering the racial composition of contemporary Cuba, the black and racially-mixed populations together already represent the majority.

Here precisely lies the problem. In the United States, where the black population is about 15 percent of the total population, members of this group occupy important positions in the government and political orders. In Cuba, however, the sum of this segment of the population does not corre-



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spond with its representation in governmental or political positions. In contrast to Castro's speech of racial equality and the irrefutable fact of the growing numeric preponderance of blacks, the reality is that the country is controlled by the white elite. This

group enjoys political, cultural and economic powers that are not even close to being proportional to its statistical representation. The current political power attempts to bury this issue, taint it, or more simply, deny it. As observed by Francisco Leon in his essay, *Racial relations in Cuba, coincidences and century-old differences*:

“Culturally, after a brief campaign against racial discrimination, the practice of invalidating any public manifestation of the same became common. That allowed eliminating the most evident forms of discrimination, such as racial separation in many public plazas; but in the long run, it favored more the repression than the growth of the racist culture by considering as definitely achieved racial equality and equilibrium.”

Discrimination in Employment

Since it cannot happen otherwise, racial discrimination in Cuba also affects the area of labor relations. If it is taken into account that the black population barely receives income from the community in exile, such labor relations become more important because they are the only source of support of a segment of the population that does not have alternative financial resources.

At the beginning of 2003, Claudia Marquez Linares, an independent journalist wrote, “the investigators of the Anthropology Center, sub-office of the Ministry of Science, Technology and the Environment, stressed that racism was eradicated from institutions after 1959; a view that contradicted with the information that the same center provides in relation to the percentage of black employees in the tourism sector. According to the Anthropology Center, 80 percent of tourism personnel is white and only 5 percent is black. One must

add to this that more than 70 percent of the population in the penal system is black or mixed, which represents, according to statistics from the center, 30% and 10%, respectively, of the current population.” Relevant to this data, the correspondent to the BBC in La Habana, Fernando Ravsberg, asserted in one of his reports that “the whites are the majority in the strongest areas of the economy, while most of the blacks are placed in companies without access to the financial gains.” These companies do not have access to foreign currency that is indispensable for the daily sustenance of the Island.

Keep in mind that the jobs in the tourism sector are the most coveted in a country where access to foreign currency guarantees a basic means of survival, and where the population, whether white or black, is segregated in spite of (or due to) its autochthonous condition.

In a nation like Cuba, which is supposedly revolutionary and increasingly mixed, racial discrimination in employment is inexcusable. Political and cultural discrimination practiced against blacks can almost be considered absurd. Nevertheless, everything in the reality of the current Cuba contradicts the pro-government speech, which states that blacks and whites jointly make or break the nation’s fate.

Culture, Politics and Discrimination

In the field of high governmental politics, the lack of black representation is loud and clear. Excluding historical figures like Juan Almeida or Esteban Lazo, the racial composition of Cuba’s political power spheres is eminently white, particularly among the rising stars or juveniles who are the most extremist. These individuals are popularly known as “Taliban” because of

their extreme conservatism. This group is not only related to the pure and hard racism that the white administration exercises from its “revolutionary” watchtowers, but to an even deeper level and, of course, equally racist level as evident by the scarce presence of the black person in the higher education centers. It was confirmed by Manuel Cuesta Morua, a social-democratic dissident, in the second series of the magazine *Consensus*: “We know very well that the black presence in the Cuban centers of high culture has left and, thereby, leaves a lot to be desired. Today based on some facts that I must confirm, 92 percent of university students in Cuba are what we call today the white race.”

Further on he commented “But, serious business: the intellectual criminalization and demoralization of a basic fragment of our identity is the first step toward the future legalization of a racist nation project, that has already been put in motion in some capitals and many cities, including La Habana, and for the acceptance of penal and police discrimination that the black person suffers in Cuba today. And grave business: in a country where the majorities, according to the Inter-American Bank of Development, are constituted by what is poorly denominated Afro-Latino, such an intellectual return to the womb could turn out to be dangerous.”

Thus, racial discrimination in the cultural sphere is present in all of the segments and levels of society, deteriorating, if possible, into something as broad as television. It’s about the means that by definition should reflect the Cuban reality, reproducing the codes of the street and of the real life in its real consistency. All the opposite happens: the black man never takes the leading role, there is an abundance of clichés and stereotypes in which a latent racism lies, and there is a lack of attention to the problem of dis-

crimination. The multimedia offensive appeals to blacks and whites as one main divulging channel through television, certainly, but that does not mean that this would result in the black population being represented in the media in realistic proportions. The black person continues suffering a systematic exclusion and underestimation in the mass media that, in terms of having the leading role, it overloads its social and political performance; even the Afro-Cuban religious callings are ridiculed and/or ignored, rejected from these means. As stated by Francisco Leon in the already cited essay, “the syncretistic religious authorities wait for the day in which they can have public recognition as those shown by the regime during the Pope’s visit or, in yonder times, the concentration of other believers in the José Martí Plaza.”

After almost five decades of revolution, the reality of the current Cuba reveals, with highlights, the essentially rhetorical character of racial equality as announced by the Fidel Castro regime. A black person becomes a multimedia symbol of a liberation that is in the end artificial or, at least, inconclusive, because it was or is based on an acceptance has not been put into practice. The white preponderance, on a cultural and political scale, cannot be denied in the Cuba of the third millennium, although during half a century of totalitarianism, the racial composition of the nation has varied substantially, tilting the balance toward black and racially-mixed people.

Equality in the multimedia. That is where the equality project planted by castroism remains.