

Obama's Reception in Cuba

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There is a difference between impact and reception. 'Impact' is the effect an object or a certain bit of news has on someone. 'Reception' is that person's ability to absorb the impact, and how he or she "processes" it in a manner that will allow him or her to internalize and accept it, along with its current and future consequences. One must be prepared to deal with this when speaking about impact and reception.

All of Cuba was impacted by the election of Barack Hussein Obama as the 44th President of the United States of America. A black president might be conceivable in Africa but nowhere else in the world, much less the United States. If anyone in Cuba felt absolutely certain that Obama would be able to rise to such a position, that individual was defying everything about his or her own cultural environment to venture becoming an island fortune-teller.

Actually, some of that did really go on here, but judging from these fortune-tellers' reaction their premonition was the most concise expression of their desires—that a black man be elected president in the least likely place. Moreover, many of those who wanted this good news to come true did so more to psychologically provoke the government and elicit a response from it than for any other postmodern, post-racist reason.

Of course, a measure of impact depends

almost entirely on who is being impacted—on its recipient. One must factor in all the differing sectors, racial groups, interests, political views, and what we might call the culturally obstinate part of Cuban society—people who are bent on denying any new information because that data doesn't conform to their own precious ideas—when measuring impact.

I will use this as my point of departure, although I cannot cover the entire spectrum, since that would require much more detail than I can herein provide. In any event, this obstinate sector got some very bad news. Obama represents for it the destruction of a theoretical, cultural and political scaffolding that has held it aloft for almost fifty years. Its members are now over 60 years old. Even so, many folks this age wanted Obama to get where he got, although for extremely racist reasons. They are primarily from the central provinces, in Holguín and the rural areas around the City of Havana.

This is a multiracial (white, black, *mestizo*) group that has no idea or reliable information about what is truly happening in the world. Its members have hardly ever left Cuba and associate blacks mostly with music and not much else, boxing, perhaps, if not just sports, generally—because they require toughness. Because this sector—as a captive audience—has actually had to endure an incessant barrage from lying media officials about racism in U.S.



Barack H. Obama taking the Presidential Oath as 44th President of the United States

society, it is the least likely to admit that the U.S. has done something right in electing Obama.

In this sense, with much less information than many Cubans in the United States have, its members are in the same straights as those in Cuba who have not yet woken up to the U.S.'s post-November 4th, 2008, reality. Here is an interesting tidbit, but information is not everything. One additionally needs *information to mature and grow by*. This is what allows people to absorb certain facts that are considered unpleasant. For the folks who make up this group, the U.S.'s election results can be found in a conspiracy: superior forces, small interest groups with spurious interests that realized a post-Bush United States needed a new image, a new face that would restore global confidence in the *American Way of Life*. Over the course of four years, those interests will make sure to put on a short tether any of liberal tendencies revealed by Obama, a man who, after all, has

made his way into the White House thanks to drowsy Yankees.

For the members of this group, Obama's reception receives the same attention as a passing rain. He is accepted, because it always rains and then stops raining: that is, Obama will be assassinated while turning some Washington street corner, even if he's not in a convertible car like John F. Kennedy. That is what they think, and they lose sleep as they await this news before anyone else finds out about it.

This deeply racist group of people for whom what transpired after midnight of November 4th was almost as bad as the fall of the Berlin Wall, and caused it yet another sleepless night, can be divided into various sub-groups.

One of them is the media. Using the same definition of 'impact' in all instances, the media's reaction to the Obama victory is essentially subtle, despite the fact that in moments of desperation, it screws up and predicts that 47-



Crowd celebrating on the National Mall in Washington, D.C.

year old Obama can die of natural causes. This sector is full of young people, mostly militant Party or Communist Youth types, who hang around media officials. One can see the very same kind of people over and over, on Cuban Television's Round Table, which could be considered one of the most racist media outlets in the Western hemisphere.

This sub-group has received Obama with political subtlety. Given its political capriciousness, it does not have the luxury of seeming politically incorrect, lest it provoke a rapid reaction on the part of African-Americans to any perceived racism on its part. This group remembers all too well what happened when Mexican President Vicente Fox humiliated the empire's proud blacks: it has the mimetic ability to today be one thing and tomorrow seem like the new *Black Panthers* of the Caribbean.

We shall call another sub-grouping of these folks the political sub-sector. It is said

their members are known for their words, but in Cuba they also could be known for their silence. This group cannot come to terms with having to accept a president who represents so much bad news for it: Obama is a young and intelligent democrat with liberal tendencies whose new rhetoric was able to garner him more than 120 million U.S. votes and attract young voters, many of them daring and capable of lifting the embargo against Cuba with just a few magic words before Congress—and he is black. This is too much for a group of like-minded people who grew up believing that whites are superior.

The response to all this? Silence. Not wait to see what happens but rather figure out how to fit in a world with less and less room for political silliness. What had to happen is finally happening; a global revolution that is affecting all possible orders, that is breaking down all the established political models. Obama's

everyday governance will be of the least importance. The real issue will be to figure out how to resolve the cultural dilemma that Cuba has always had thanks to the now old *crillo* elite that still holds the power: what to do with our black half?

This social sub-group's dilemma can be best understood if one compares it to that of another sub-group of obstinate people: a small group of liberals made up of members of the Cuban nomenclature who are professionals, university professors and researchers, members of the cultural elite, etc. For them, an Obama presidency is interesting, but they are faced with a kind of good news-bad news situation, too. 'The good news?' they ask. That the United States has just elected a democratic president who is something like Kennedy, something like Carter, who favors a change in the U.S.'s Cuba policy, which could make it easier for us to receive remittances from the U.S., for our families to return, and for us to finally possibly take our last postponed trip to that great country. 'How wonderful!' exclaim the communist liberals, known in Cuba as YUMMIs: Young Upwardly Mobil Marxists. 'So, what is the bad news?' they ask. 'Well, it is just that this president, who is black, takes us right back to our old [and racist] square one, and we don't know if this will be a problem for you or not—officially or unofficially.'

The politically liberal sub-group's racism confirms the racism of their toughest 'partners' [buddies] and explains its total silence. Even so, the reaction to the Obama news amongst common, everyday people is quite inspiring. It has caused a veritable apotheosis in Santiago de Cuba and Guantánamo. In contrast to certain areas of Havana, some folks in other parts of the city had parties and wanted to hit the streets with conga lines. In Vedado,

many 'fused,' post-racial' citizens got together in front of hotel televisions, to watch the step-by-step developments unfold. When the news of Obama's victory was confirmed, they broke into jubilee. I know of a boarding school where the students danced upon hearing the news, and of people who want to create Obama clubs in different places throughout the island.

This popular reaction represents a terrible paradox that confirms just how culturally and politically out of step Cuba is: the president of the United States, Cuba's enemy country, which Cuban leaders have used all the while to structurally define the island State's policies, is more popular within Cuba than its very own leaders. *Cubabarómetro* is currently conducting a survey that will produce an actually quantifiable analysis of this situation. In any event, Obama's deep impact in Cuba, though not in rural areas, can be explained simply by observing how news of his election was received.

This is culturally significant. Blacks hearts are swelling with new racial pride in Cuba, even among the *negrotoms* [derived from the term 'Uncle Tom'], of which there are many. Even they are finding a new strength with which to define a place for themselves. The State's entire cultural apparatus has no way of knowing how to explain how in the midst of segregationist racism an African surname (Obama) beat out a Scotch one (McCain) in the battle for the empire's primary seat of power. In Cuba, where if they are of different races one Rodríguez has more of a chance than another, and where a kind of cordial, fraternal and friendly racism confuses us in our separation, the Obama reality is simply mind-blowing. What someone cynical might be able to say or do about it is quite another thing.