

The Fourth Affront

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As with so many other aspects of our reality, the basis upon which black men are said to be the most *machista* of all Cubans, as general rule, is a racist one. It would be different if the assertion were that black Cuban women suffer more than white ones, on account of virulent *machismo*, due to a combination of really offensive factors. *Machismo* victimizes these women on three simultaneous fronts: the most brutal, the most unjust, and the most painful.

First, just like all other women, they have had to endure the weight of Cuban patriarchal culture, because of their historical legacy, and specifically in their socio-economic development. These factors are as subjugating as they are difficult to fairly address. Second, unlike their white counterparts, they suffer the consequences of the diabolic and savage legacy with which slavery intensified that original patriarchal culture. Third, in the past, as in the present, they must endure being the pained victims of other victims—their men. These men are condemned to a life of struggling between their own discriminated condition—as blacks—and the paradoxical effects that cause them to also discriminate against women.

These facts have always been very obvious; they have always been right in front of our noses. Yet, the tendency is to not talk about them, much less about the specifics. This has been even more the case in the past few decades.

One of the reasons for this must be that our general lack of historiographic information on the topic of racism would hinder any analysis of the current state of black Cuban *machismo*.

This issue is loudly begging attention from historians and scholars from other complementary disciplines. Thankfully, some have begun to give the matter its merited due; that is, they are working outside the ideological framework, dogma, and naïve rigidity that nearly fifty years have mediated.

The urgent need for this topic to be studied by contemporary Cuban scholars should be more than obvious. So, too, our desire to see the results of these new studies published in black and white.

For the time being, it will suffice to quickly and minimally outline this problem, whose urgency is increasing right along with the increase there has been in the amount of injustice we are seeing, and in its contaminating consequences: false beliefs and corrupt legal proceedings. The incidence of these is rising at an alarming rate—at least in Cuba. To blacks is ascribed the shameful blame for being the worst *machistas* in Cuba, but also for being the most abusive with their women, too.

It is not true, of course, that the hegemonic (and naturally white) classes are the only ones responsible for *machismo* among island blacks, but they are to blame for the persistent

nature of its worst abuses and debauchery. Yet, they are not to blame for creating the perception that as *machistas*, black Cuban men are more stubborn and violent than whites, which is entirely unsupported by empirical, scientific evidence.

The most brutal

The legends of the Bible and the Greeks' idiosyncratic ideas—both indisputable sources for Western culture—did not originate in Africa. Yet, the tenacious dominance of *machismo* is present in both of them. It may seem redundant to recall this, but it is definitely relevant. The reason? Because those who today present black Cuban men as the epitome of *machismo* in their behavior, tend to relate this to their African ancestors. Not until the French Revolution—one of the most important social, political and economic events in Western history—was it that feminists were led to the guillotine for being found guilty of transgressing the laws of nature. Just for being feminists. It is not that there were no androcentric views in Africa, just as any other place on Earth (although it was perhaps more generalized in Africa than elsewhere). But, to ignore the decisive contribution of Europe's legacy to our *machista* backwardness—even at its worst—is indicative of a very deliberately prejudicial perspective.

One need only cite Karl Marx, whose assertions and precepts have been part of Cuban daily life for several decades, to clear up any doubt whatsoever: "The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas," he wrote.¹ Given the current circumstances, this sole line is enough to put a stop to those who propagate the myth that the bitterest aspects of *machismo* came to us from Africa.

Consequently, we should ask ourselves how such malicious practices survive and even pros-

per in an environment where said ideology controls everything, when they contradict Cuba's dominant ideology. Might it be the case that the opinion makers and guarantors of unified thinking among our masses are unaware of this widely circulated and unjust accusation that affects blacks? It is impossible to think that they had not been capable of discovering their own racist tendencies, if they were aware at all of them? Were that the case, how does one explain that ideologues, historians and social analysts alike have shown no interest whatever in dismantling the myth? The only answer consistent with all this is that the subject of racism and *machismo*, like many others, has remained in the realm of the untouchable, because dealing with them would be to go against officialdom, and its refusal (it has refused for five decades) to publicly explore the historical and socio-economic differences that still exist between whites and blacks on the island.

If all official studies are conducted using Cubanness as a theoretical framework, and they do not consider the specific nature of our social composition, we might be able to understand why the false notion that Cuban blacks represent the epitome of *machismo* has not been sufficiently debated. This discussion would not necessarily distance us at all. On the contrary, it would not be good for our government's leaders.

Even Cuban feminists often forget or neglect to include in their observations (which should make clear distinctions, as is appropriate) that black women are in a disadvantaged position whenever they have to face a fourth affront, in addition to three others—even among the feminists themselves. This fourth affront affects both women and men in their socio-racial group, and the strain the issue causes when it is presented in a racist perspective, makes difficult any study of the problem and complicates potential solutions.

The most unjust

Cubans who today believe that blacks are the worst *machistas* on the island may number in the hundreds of thousands. White families often use this criticism when they lecture their daughters about how difficult it would be to enter into relationships with black men. Above all, there are three things that typify—erroneously—the behavior of *machista* slave descendents: a) they are not good husbands because of their (so-called innate) tendency towards sexual promiscuity, and open detachment from marital stability; b) they are not good fathers, for the same reasons; c) they tend to be vulgar and violent in treating their partners, and disrespect and even beat them in public.

Of course, there are no statistics, or any other sociological evidence to support these accusations. At best—they are just part of the popular imaginary. What is absolutely and immediately certain and verifiable, despite a lack of studies specific to the subject, is that the harmful attitudes of the *machismo* that is ascribed to blacks are generally present among most men in Cuba today—regardless of race. They survive and are passed on in an environment where their rhetorical representations have served only to worsen the problem of discrimination, and attempts to hide it behind a naïve, or incorrect and slippery conceptualization of it.

That Cuban blacks today serve as an example of fondness for family, and of solidarity within their own social class, is totally verifiable (and currently accepted by anyone who spends a lot of time in their neighborhoods and observes their lifestyle). Furthermore, this is true despite the drastic crisis of values that has plagued our society in the past decades. Yet, we mustn't forget that some of the charges leveled by those who speculate about the bad reputa-

tion of blacks as *machistas* originated with some of the worst practices imposed on their ancestors by slavery.

Because historians have abundantly examined the specific issue of marriage, we know that as an institution, it was not made available to slaves. By law, they were not permitted to have legitimate children, either. The treatment afforded black women, as simple objects of pleasure—to be used—is even better known yet. No social norms regarding respect or consideration played into their situation. There is not even minimal reproach for men who limit their dealings with them to obtaining what they want from them without making commitments, often achieving this through brute force.

On the subject of the liberating struggle these women should have taken up, right back in the twentieth century, Cuban historian María del Carmen Barcia points out that: “[black] and *mestiza* women, in their doubly discriminated condition, are the victims of a past filled with consensual unions, illegitimate children, and a social and cultural marginalization they were ready to give up at any price. In addition to the racial discrimination they faced, which was rooted in slavery and manifested itself in the different treatment they received because of their skin color, they received different treatment because they were women. The Cuban *mulata* (a term to which some contemporaries ascribe a pejorative origin, because it refers to the hybrid nature of a mule, which results from the crossing of a donkey and a mare) resulted from the union of a white man and black woman. The *mulata* tended to take after her paternal side, and became lighter and lighter-skinned in later generations.”²

Thus, the recrimination of which blacks are currently victims, which presents them as the worse *machistas* of our society (supposed-

ly due to their African ancestry) is not only indicative of historical ignorance and hypocritical roguery, but also represents an injustice that can only find support in the barriers of racial prejudice that still shape our thinking. With this, we could also include the figurative penitential garment we force them to wear, that marks them as violent *machistas*. This is nothing more than evidence of other, more damaging characterizations that are made of them—that they are raucous, criminal, social norm transgressors, uncouth, and jailbait—an attitude that retrograde and reactionary racism fully endorses.

Just as racial discrimination is not a problem only for those who are discriminated, but also for the discriminators (perhaps more so, morally), sexual or gender discrimination does not only affect women. The combination of both scourges, operating potentially together, has social, cultural, and political implications for every segment of our society. Why? Because it constitutes an attack on the very core of our identity as a nation, which explains why it is strange that this form of racism crops up seemingly independently, with no criticism from those who have the power and the media resources to combat it.

The most painful

We are told that women were finally able to leave the four walls of their homes in the second half of the XIXth century, as a result of the Industrial Revolution, in England. As a result, they were able to show their talent and impact as workers both in industry and other public spheres. Yet, what at first seemed to be a great victory, as regarded their independence and self-realization (because, in fact, it was), seemed to come crashing down on them when they saw themselves forced to work outside their homes for more than twelve hours—for a

much lower salary than men—and not being freed from the workload they had before, at home.

Somehow, this history brings us back to the subject of what has been going on lately, in Cuba. No one can deny (at least based on the facts) the enormous gains the freedom struggle of our women brought about—a large number of regulations, decisions, and laws created by the government in recent decades. In practice, though, one cannot find any relationship—however small—between their objective and patriarchal oppression, both at home and in public. Unfortunately, we are not permitted to talk about this, despite the fact that many scholars study this quite a bit. Of course, their research is too often negatively affected by the aforementioned, ideological rigidity. For example, if it still easy to find examples of gender discrimination, despite the fact it is against the law and even contrary to official political rhetoric (as even the feminists would say), this is not only because the basic precepts of our androcentric past began to be forcefully imposed—all by themselves—on judicial structures and social projects devoted to ending discrimination against women. The fact is that subjectivity has affected the supposed objectivity of our social structures, beginning with that of the people who have designed these projects, who should systematize their realization from the very beginning.

In any event, our attention is on the damage that the remaining dregs of our racist legacy have incurred on this phenomemon. Just like gender prejudices, racial prejudices have been officially rejected in Cuba in recent times. Laws, decisions, and speeches support this rejection. Yet, as we have already seen in the case of gender, the subjectivity of people's mindsets undermines the foundation of our social structures. The consequences, as we can also see, weigh quite heavily on black women,

who are victims of a triple affront whose most painful effect is being discriminated on account of the color of their skin. If that which most identifies human beings is also the cause of their alienation and mutual rejection, then there is no doubt that this evil (prejudice) threatens to win, and with this tear gaping holes in our identity and psychological integrity, and take hostage matters of the spirit. This requires an immediate and all-out counterattack.

As usual, of course, the immediate victims of this tragedy are the least prepared to confront it. This is another consequence they must pay: they must be willing to patiently wait, and be killed with apparent kindness,

while they await a positive response from those seemingly innocent and well-meaning opinion makers—the wise ideologues, mentors and great thinkers—who do not seem to feel or suffer the effects of this scourge.

Notes:

1- Marx, Karl. *La ideología alemana*. Montevideo [Uruguay]: Edición Pueblos Unidos (1959): 48.

2- Barcia, María del Carmen. *Mujeres al margen de la historia*. La Habana: Editorial de Ciencias Sociales (2009): 120 s.