

# There are Palestinians in Havana?

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The anthropological typification of the *palestino* [Palestinian] involves a strange coincidence. ‘Philistine’ (*p’lish-tim* in Hebrew), or Filistin, in Arabic, is the root of the words Palestinians and Palestine, the latter of which is the name of the entire disputed region. Jerusalem, its most important cultural and religious center, is also home to the three most important world religions: Judaism, Christianity and Islam.

On the island, Santiago de Cuba was the first city forseen to serve as the island’s capital, and also gave the country its name. It did not serve as any religion’s center, of course, but essentially does serve to link Cuba to the rest of the Caribbean, and to define national cultural diversity. If not for Santiago de Cuba, the island’s religious and civic diversity and cosmopolitanism would suffer.

Whereas Palestine is at the crossroads of East and West, and represents a bit of both, Santiago de Cuba is at the confluence of Spain and the rest of the West, and gives us the Peninsular culture we derive from that country

as well as that of France, England, Haiti and Jamaica. The wealth of both territories—Palestine and Santiago de Cuba, and their respective importance for the Middle East and Cuba, is undermined by the racism with which these regions are seen by others: the first aspires to official nationhood, the second is its country’s second most important province. Palestinians are discriminated against by Jews and also other Arabs; Cuban residents of Santiago endure the rest of their countrymen’s racism, and that of other *orientales* [Easterners], such as the residents of Holguín.

In Cuba, the use of the term *palestino* is racist; it is used to refer to a group of people who are considered inferior. As such, it is seen as not having undergone universal culture’s difficult process. By extension, the concept ‘Palestinian’ is now culturally defined in Cuba according to the media’s and everyone’s historical perception of Palestinians, and their fixation on global subjectivity. Cuba’s racist definition of *palestinos* refers to a wandering, violent, insecure, culturally inferior, dependant

and uncivilized people; a group with few good customs, is seen as being very provisional, as having a profound inferiority complex, and being destined to be dominated by other cultures. This is the meaning this term has in Cuba, which is a reflection of how racism has more to do with a feeling of superiority and a kind of discrimination that is more based on cultural traits than on skin color or race.

This new racism came about as a result of the Cuban Revolution. Before 1959, racism was characterized by an attitude of supposed cultural superiority that was concomitant with race or skin color. This was reflected in negative attitudes towards miscegenation, at least among the white elite. All other discrimination of this sort was attributed to simple, historical regionalism, which was not racism because it did not evoke superiority but rather just exclusive pride in one's region. This imputed regionalism was slowly undermined by train travel, and later, by the Central Highway and, finally, by the strong sense of political unity we derive from an indivisible State. Yet, for racism to derive from regionalism is something new. The fact that an early attempt to turn the town of Santiago de Cuba into the country's capital failed, mostly due to economic reasons, when the town of San Cristóbal de La Habana became firmly established as a center of political, economic and cultural activity on the island, does not necessarily justify or explain the way in which Cuba's *Oriente* [eastern part] has come to be strongly perceived today.

Something happened somewhere along the way for this region, so rich in traditions, the birthplace of our nationality, and a place that gave us distinguished artists, thinkers and strategists, now be considered as Cuba's Palestine—mostly in Havana. In fact, this exemplifies a kind of double racism that discriminates against the historical Palestinians via these new cultural ones.

## *What happened?*

Cuba is an underdeveloped country in which there is an enormous disparity between the standard of living of those who live in the island's west and east. Despite the fact there are obvious signs of deterioration in the capital, it continues to enjoy the most attractive draw of all the island's regions, particularly when compared to its eastern part. If in addition to this, we take into account that Oriente has the largest black and *mestizo* population, we can now understand why there is so much migration from the island's eastern, *palestino* region, to the capital—particularly among those who belong to the lowest social stratum and are culturally underprivileged. The problem with this results when eastern blacks move to Havana for some reason or another, and then have to endure double discrimination: the kind that all blacks—whether from Havana or the east—have to suffer, and the kind that is directed specifically against easterners—black or white. Such is the degree to which this is true that the following pejorative expression enjoys popularity in Havana: “to be black, eastern and shit is one and the same thing.”

By now, someone could actually write a whole book titled *Revenge of the Easterners*. This disproportionate migration from the east to Havana, provoked and keeps eliciting from the more or less historical residents of the capital a reaction that combined traditional racism with the old-style regionalism, and produced a particularly virulent kind of racism defined by a mixture of natural, regional cultural differences—a race-based racism, class differences and hegemonic practices. What I am calling new racism is a potentially explosive blend that is generating a lack of cultural communication in Havana and deepening old regional differences between east and west.

There may be one specific reason why this conflict is difficult to manage. The current residents of Havana don't seem to realize that the capital is a cosmopolitan place; their behavior is marked by the same kind of provincial regionalism that affects other parts of the country. Many of Havana's residents are part of a group of "new conquistadors" that arrived at the beginning of the Revolution. Once in Havana, their behavior followed patterns they inherited from the regionalism of their place of origin. Most of the capital's elite is of *palestino* descent. It is common for those who are the first to arrive somewhere—not just in Cuba, but anywhere—to attempt or succeed in essentially closing the door to those who come after. One finds this phenomenon in the United States, too.

It is noteworthy that the term *palestino* got its legitimacy when Fidel Castro gave it a political and media push during the nineties. Actually, this is doubly noteworthy: first, because he, himself, had been a recent arrival in his own time, and second, because he was from the most racist region in Cuba: the province of Holguín.

For this reason, the term *palestino* should never be applied to people from Holguín. They do not migrate to Havana in the same numbers, and are noticeably white and relatively solvent: Holguín is a well known tourist desti-

nation; its inhabitants have links to families abroad; and, display a cultural pride that manifests itself as a superior air over the rest of their region. The politico-cultural connotation of the term *palestino* is currently making an impact throughout the whole country. It is identified with an exercise of punitive authority (the government, the army and the police) and creates a combined sense of aristocracy and domination that affects the country's civic unity at an important cultural level. We run the risk of this new racism becoming an automatic factor in the way people subjectively express themselves in the future, which could cause division amongst Cubans and hurt Cuba's united diversity. At the same time, it is both dangerous and interesting to explore how this new racism accentuates the natural differences that exist in the way people talk, and in their accents, as ways to distinguish among them, and superiority. This would seem to indicate that this combination of new and old racisms might go on for quite some time. If racism becomes intrinsically ingrained in our society—in its cultural traits—and uses as a weapon differences that should be seen as representing our riches, then racism will be around for a long time. No *palestino*, not the historical or the culturally invented one, deserves having to risk that fate.