

In Defense of Citizens

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The promotion of the strongest civic and legal culture possible amongst the Cuban population is one of the most important goals of the Citizens' Committee for Racial Integration's most crucial action programs. Its purpose is to confront the arbitrariness, injustice, and impunity with which Cuban authorities continue to ignore citizens' rights and dignity.

Cuba is suffering from the most disproportionate lack of references and tools with which to guarantee an adequately balanced social order, and the protection of individual rights and integrity. This can be explained by the imposition—for over fifty years—of a system of absolute power and control, and the ideologization of all structures and mechanisms meant to ensure order.

Ever since 1959, the police, courts and neighborhood watch committees have become “revolutionary.” This has guaranteed the subjective nature of these structures, and the helplessness of citizens in facing the power elite's designs and interests. This structural atrophy—a situation that was unimaginable before the Revolution's triumph—created an enormous cultural lacuna in Cuban society. Generations of Cubans grew up in that envi-

ronment, without knowing about rights, or having a clear sense of the place and role of citizens and the State in Cuba, or about social dynamics.

In Cuba, neither the collective imaginary nor patterns of coexistence afford the Constitution, laws, power structures, social protective mechanisms, or governmental responsibility the place they deserve.

We Cubans—both those who govern and are governed—have become accustomed to accepting and living with the authorities' unpunished arbitrariness—at all levels. So, too, is the case with the civic incapacity of a society that lacks the independent mechanisms and structures to monitor and protect the exercising of rights.

Said structural vacuum, in addition to so many decades of extremist intolerance, have perfectly complemented a cultural tradition that has been shaped by a pattern of exclusionary behavior towards minorities, those who are different, less fortunate and vulnerable. Even though African descendents, homosexuals, religious people, folks hailing from the island's eastern regions, and even political dissidents do not exactly constitute a minority, we have all suffered the normative view of discrimina-

tion and exclusion that characterizes contemporary Cuban society.

All the ill will and feelings of rejection that these discriminatory and exclusionary practices create are made worse by the fact that there is no public or institutional place in which to project or vent them. Lately, those in power have chosen to promote more freedom, spaces and recognition for religious practices and sexual diversity, but always from a paternalistic, manipulative and controlling vantage point. The authorities will always look upon any truly independent projection with suspicion. They are always ready to activate their well-oiled repression machine.

Black Cubans, political dissidents, and Cubans from the eastern provinces have not yet seen any relaxing of discrimination's tight squeeze. In addition to the historic, socioeconomic disadvantages we bear, black Cubans also suffer the concrete effects of the permanent and prevailing nature of hegemony's exclusionary patterns on Cuban society, despite the traditionally dominant elite's change of ideology.

In the current situation, blacks are assumed to be presumptive delinquents, which creates the greatly criticized and persistent arbitrariness of the local police, and its overuse of a form of racial profiling known as perceiving 'pre-criminal dangerousness.' This legal aberration has sent thousands of young black man to extremely overpopulated island prisons.

People with a particular kind of power exclude or discriminate blacks at institutional and work-related spaces with impunity. They do this fully knowing that the mechanisms that are supposed to deal with this problem are embarrassingly inefficient. Blacks continue to

be omitted or caricatured on state television, and in other media, all of which remain unscathed by all the criticism and doubt that social atrophy has inspired among intellectual circles for years.

Unbelievably, the State has insisted upon the construction of two orthodox cathedrals—within the very poor, mostly black, inner city limits, but continues to prohibit the consecration of two temples for Afro-Cuban religious practices.

This and other evidence urgently shows the need for society to produce an answer that promotes new ways of thinking, to bring Cuba up to speed on universal tendencies regarding respect and the protection of the rights of individuals and groups.

The *Citizens' Observatory Against Discrimination* (OCD) offers an alternative, civil way of struggling against all forms of discrimination. It is destined to contribute to the reordering of our coexistence, while taking into account respect for the dignity, rights, and integrity of human beings—with no distinctions or manipulations. The OCD will emphasize a very necessary educational campaign, and citizen empowerment, to give Cubans the references, and conceptual and legal tools they need to defend their rights and dignity.

With these universal tools and experiences promoting and protecting rights and freedoms, and the encouragement of citizens to more fully participate, the OCD is proposing to make a capital contribution to an essentially necessary transformation in the realm of the cultural and institutional references that are needed for the construction of the just, egalitarian, and balanced Cuba we have dreamt about for so long.