

[The Fatuous Flames of the Cuban Nation]

Los fuegos fatuos de la nación cubana

Los fuegos fatuos de la nación cubana. Un análisis sobre la esencia filosófica-política del racismo en Cuba, su vigencia y el futuro de la nación cubana. Iván César Martínez and Juan F. Benemelis. Kingston [Jamaica]: The Ceiba Institute of Afro-Cuban Studies, 2009. 230 pages.

Orula says: Knowledge is shared.

An *Oddun* of the Ocha-Ifá philosophical-religious system

I reread *Los fuegos fatuos de la nación cubana. Un análisis sobre la esencia filosófica-política del racismo en Cuba, su vigencia y el futuro de la nación cubana* [The Fatuous Flames of the Cuban Nation: An Analysis of the Philosophical-Political Essence of Racism in Cuba, its Effect, and the Future of the Cuban Nation], with the eagerness and desire of one who is discovering a different Cuba, one that has remained hidden from us once and again. I am doing so while being led by the hands of masters who were *verboten* to those generations that were born in Cuba after the political, economic, and cultural changes that transpired after 1959. My good fortune upon coming to know them quickly allowed me to have a copy of this book. Paradoxically, this weighs upon me, when I think of all the Cuban men and women who should immediately have this book near them—not in a library—but at home. It should not be on the bookshelf, but right at hand, as close to them as possible, so they can caress it as we all try to extract the balsam its authors—Iván César Martínez and Juan F. Benemelis—offer us.

This is not about a passing trend. In their creation, they offer us something whose study and understanding have become an absolutely necessary imperative for us. This is certainly the case if we truly intend to explore and understand ourselves as the nation we have really been—with its many imperfections, including deviant marginalization and exclusion. We must also do this if we are to move forward towards the nation we should be, *the one that is possible*, one that is free of the colonial trappings that have dragged it down since its inception—and that it has not been able to shake off (32).

Among the imperfections it examines is a basic one—race—as a historic construction of essentially politico-economic interest. It describes it “as an ideology of hate, of coldness; one lacking human solidarity, disdain, arrogance, exploitation, genocide and the psychological destruction of its victims” (9). Race and racism make possible the creation of a hierarchy of inferiors and superiors. Phenotype is falsely justified as a determining

criterion that engenders, spreads, and transcends the atrophied working of societies.

I

Martínez and Benemelis are well versed on this subject, not only as a result of their studies, but also through their personal experiences as social activists and relentless travellers. All this and their talents have allowed them to craft this learned and empirical yet accessible work. It is as informative as it is reflexive—theoretical and judgmental. It is not unnecessarily dense, but rather a book that serves as a reference, and sometimes even as a demanding political manifesto. This should not surprise us, if we take into account the commitment of both authors to directly fighting anti-black racism.

They have amply based their work on history, humanity, and Cuba, examining traces of racism and discrimination that few well-meaning (or deliberately negligent) scholars do. Their pleasant prose is illustrative and informative, and free of pretentious complexities and airs. They fearlessly use sociology and anthropology, and even psychology, in their review of philosophy and political science, knowing fully well that these sciences have greatly served the discriminatory interests of those in power since their earliest years.

They opportunely remind us “history is written by the victor, who uses his power to legitimate and validate the interests, ideas, intentions, convenience and values he plans to spawn among the defeated” (28). This explains why at the beginning of their conclusions they emphasize they have “used ‘reconstruction’ to look within the philosophy of the history of Cuban history, because it is a more efficient method...with which to approach the very specific, incisive and cynically evasive Cuban racial phenomenon, with all its implied social

exclusion, ‘racial’ subordination, human alienation, coercion, and ‘superior’ and ‘inferior’ stereotypes, all of which have played a role in Cuba’s social drama” (217).

Martínez and Benemelis have been extremely methodical. This book is the result of bibliographical research and fieldwork. We would be naïve to think that even the life experiences of the two author-scholars—which derive from their ideological positions, as is the case with everyone—have not contributed to it. They warn their readers that it would be “inadequate and useless to want to be impartial and intellectually neutral in an examination of this problem. It would be difficult to unravel from a position of neutrality a construction created in an ideologically specific context of control and exclusion. Examples of this context are a secular or religious patriarchy, or a slave or sexist power paradigm, both of which serve to efficiently impede in the lives and presence of major groups within the human family” (104).

This book’s 230 pages, its 13 chapters, introduction, and seemingly short conclusion (a mere one and a half pages that should be taken seriously, due to their profundity and currency regarding the topic’s national importance), should not be overlooked. In it we find philosophical theory and analysis (and even a full conceptualization), a review of the origins of slavery, and of how racism was transformed into being slavery’s primary mainstay, and the basis for a white supremacy that exists even today. The inhuman consequences of this supremacy, and its ability to keep power in the hands of one race; the limitless justifications of racism offered by anthropological rhetoric, and the overwhelming attitude of white Cuban intellectuals and scientists that espoused this rhetoric; the persistence of “fear of blacks,” an attitude inherited since the time of the Haitian Revolution, that still persists within the

island's (Fidelista) power infrastructure; the concordance of Marxism and racism, and the incoherent relationship between the practice of racism in a democratic, socio-political system, and the human rights' violations implicit in a racist system of repression; the seldom happy connection between culture and nation; and, a thorough examination of Cuba's socio-racist structure between 1902 and 1958 (with differently named chapters), all play a role in this book's examination of these structures during the last 51 years of life experiences in Cuba.

In addition to all this, *Los fuegos fatuos de la nación cubana* offers us an analysis of *negritude*, in all its varieties and forms; a reason for why racism was not eradicated on the island; and, a "messianic and political myth"—the anxious search for a quasi-divine figure (176), a synthesis of Antonio Maceo and José Martí, "a kind of Messiah who could free the nation from all its ills," using white supremacy's racist ideology (175).

One can learn a great deal from this book, despite its non-didactic, objective and polemic nature. Its authors use past history to support their analyses of the present, and their take on what the future should be. While using flashbacks, right from the very introduction, they begin their debate about the current situation, deliberately placing themselves at its very core.

Those who actually craft and enforce political policies should also avail themselves of this treatise. Rather than being censured, silenced, and hidden, which it does not deserve to be, this book should be studied, analyzed, critiqued, and discussed by Cubans on and off the island, be they scholars or not. It could also be read by so many other social groups, by victims of racism, or of any other kind of discrimination, and by their victimizers. Ultimately, they are all adversely affected and could very surely spread this evil. I am happy to know that there are currently several copies of

the book circulating around here; they are provoking puzzlement, recognition, and shock. From what I know, it is always being quietly, well received. It may even be disconcerting some folks, too.

Los fuegos fatuos de la nación cubana revisits literature, theater, poetry, social science, music, and their exponents. It intently and objectively scrutinizes and critiques their narratives of national Cubanness. Its authors do not stop to bow before the altars that have been erected to today's and yesterday's cultural, scientific, and political worlds' personalities. Tomás Romay, Fernando Ortiz, Roberto Fernández Retamar, and many more, are demystified via their own writings, e.g., José Martí and Fidel Castro. Culture and nation seem to tell us that they are not necessarily a good marriage, "they don't always fit well together" (82).

They simply cannot work together, but they will seem to, if we continue seeing reality while being confident in the rationality we have had imposed upon us, and generally seeing things "with a colonizers or colonized gaze" (82). This is why we must be able to exercise our freedom, so that our gaze can change, and we can be conscious, and apply criteria according to our own rationale, from our own perspective, without necessarily having to accept, embrace, and reproduce what those in power give us—even telling us who we are and what we are like.

The book's authors interpellate us to "pose the question of identity from a new perspective" (98). We need to acknowledge and interpret Cuban culture's specificities if we want to "craft an authentic identity, and reverse the early presentation of Europe as the canon, and Africa as what was lost" (98). This is not about chauvinism or capricious ruptures but rather about breaking with colonial knowledge, with the oppression of power. This

is about Michel Foucault's "insurrection of subjugated knowledges," which is what really brings about true independence and leads societies in their efficient decolonizing projects, as in the case of former colonies (98)

II

Professors Benemelis and Martínez take us through the demonstrable racism of those who reduce social conflicts to class struggle, an approach in use, even currently, by many island scholars who remain intent on making us believe, or at least repeating, that Cuba's problem is not racial but economic. In addition, of course, they lay the blame for this with the U.S. blockade (without now having to provide proof anymore). Now that there is a black president in the White House—a tremendous counterexample—they add one more thing to their imposed explanations: "the blame is now Obama's, for his hypocritical politics, which have followed those of his predecessor's, George W. Bush."

Those of us who were born after 1959 are distressed by the disdain for Jews, Mexicans, and Africans expressed on pages written by those who offer reductionist explanations. Would we have (or have not) questioned the need for Marxism in our Latin American and Caribbean environments, particularly in Cuba, which is so multifaceted in its way of thinking, despite the fact that we have not yet embraced pluralism? We have so many questions now, particularly concerning whether or not the self-proclaimed, Cuban Marxists knew with which political ideology they were aligning themselves. Why did they attempt to impose on an ethno-racially plural nation a political ideology that was in complete contradiction with its social reality? It is cynical and cruel to impose an ideology that defends a system of exploitation on a country whose society's eth-

nicity, culture, and economic situations were born in slavery. To then call this 'liberating' is even worse. Liberating for whom? Is it the case that Marxism, and then Marxist-Leninism, was imposed as ideological window-dressing, to perpetuate a seemingly liberating, ethno-racial system of oppression?

Once we understand that the Marxists "attacked black preachers and spiritual leaders, presenting them as 'oppressors' of the race" (43), and that they directly opposed religions of African origin, we can see clearly a continuation of a colonial polity that for over thirty years of self-proclaimed Cuban revolutionary government has considered followers of African religions to be criminals. It is obvious that for all these decades their dislike for this group has transcended the limits of any imposed, atheistic, or atheist-inspiring policies. Another important question is how any Cuban *santero*, *abakuá*, *vaudou*, or *palero* priest could gain access to the Cuban Communist Party (PCC), after the Third Congress, and its agreement to admit religious people? The Marxism, mysticism, and messianism present within the power elite's plans for the island have hindered and now made taboo, and officially prohibited any discussion or research concerning the race issue in Cuba.

In one paragraph, which could be seen as a synthesis of this situation, we are presented the depressing reality in which most of the black and mulatto Cuban population spends its life: "In spite of all these objective and real things that happen on a daily basis in Cuba, which totally contradict Martí's philosophy of "with all, and for the good of all," the foreboding of this racial drama is not fully understood, and this is all considered normal. This is due, in part, to the enormous impact of the government's continued white supremacist attitude, and especially to the way in which Martí's ideology has been put into practice for

more than fifty years—through patriotic, mystical, and paternalistic guises never seen in five centuries of white rule over the island” (180).

Even if the authors had just made their pronouncements, and then tried to photograph, and even analyze what is happening in Cuba, that would have been enough to credit them with a bullseye—but they’ve done much more.

III

This book is an outstanding piece of socially committed, intellectual work, by two authors who have delved deep into the topic. Yet, they did not create a *modus vivendi* by virtue of their positions. It is an iconoclastic and well-argued book, but may seem subversive (its thematic core has been characterized as such) to quite a few who are experts at finding enemies, and even inventing them. It is not subjective, nor does it attempt to lay blame arbitrarily. In recent decades, this tendency has been criticized in some who lack qualifications, but still do this sort of research. Only someone intent on politicking could find any trace whatsoever in this book of pamphleteering, or of arbitrarily defamatory intention or—as they say in Cuba in times of revolutionary fervor—of destructive criticism.

It is the work of two, black, Cuban intellectuals who, like so many others, have joined the Diaspora on account of their ideas about what the nation should be, and a need for it to be recomposed or truly created in a way that is committed to real parity in its integration, and not to false integration. This last option would be to reproduce a condition of subjugation. We can see this book as fruit of the labor of two legitimate and authentic Cubans, the rare sort who have really embraced Cubanness’s integrative phase in a way reminiscent of

Fernando Ortiz. They are desperate because they understand they need to progress in the construction of the nation’s identity. If this does not happen, we run the risk of its social fabric disintegrating, or ceasing to exist, which in any event amounts to the same.

Los fuegos fatuos de la nación cubana is by two intellectuals who are professionally and civically committed to their country, despite the fact that they cannot currently reside in it. This is what has helped them focus on past and present specifics concerning the race issue on the island, and foresee a possible future. They have done this without a prophetic tone, with audacity and in the exercise of the rights of Cubans and citizens. They offer us their ideas about what should be done, which is as valid and necessary to us as anything social scientists could tell us.

Anyone who reads this book can intuit from its introduction that this is case, that he is not reading a vulgar repetition of things but rather a different narrative of the nation’s history, as one of its earliest pages states: “If we want to undertake a thorough analysis and catharsis of the Cuban nation’s faults and fissures, we must reconstruct our framework according to what culture and conventional history, in all their manifestations, have given us. We must identify distorting patterns like racism, political violence, *caudillismo*, male supremacy, a subestimation of culture, among other things” (11). Further on, the authors emphasize: “Cuba’s colonial history must be rewritten to include the slave perspective, acknowledge the active contribution of their cultural legacy, see how they saw slavery and abolitionist struggles. We need to rescue slave biographies, the history of palenques, documentation, oral history, folklore. We must study the ethnic origins of those slaves, and their uprisings against the plantation system

and colony, and how these affected the island's different regions"(12).

Using their intellects to exercise their right to rebel, Iván César Martínez and Juan F. Benemelis understand the true complexity of the subject they so incisively explore. "The Revolutionary leadership," they affirm, "did not want to and cannot solve this historic problem. They cannot because they consciously and subconsciously support white supremacy, and because only the black population itself can solve it. The country's leadership can either facilitate or obstruct the process, but it cannot solve a cardinal problem of which they are part" (193). This is how these two authors explain the position from which they offer possible answers.

The operative word here is 'wait.' On occasion it is actually an order—in the toughest, military sense. This is how many want the black-*mestizo* population to keep giving more and more time to those who denigrate and disdain, subjugate and alienate them. For Benemelis and Martínez, and many other island blacks and *mestizos*, this is a tactical move: "whose objective it is to buy time, and avoid the need to directly confront the problem head on" (93). They use philosophy to remind us of our personal and collective responsibility for our actions. They warn us: "The dark-skinned population of Cuba should take control of its collective actions, and make definitive decisions about what it should do to get out of its prolonged and permanent subordination, harassment, marginalization, and loss of individual and collective freedoms" (193). They also reiterate: "Those who follow and live their lives according to white supremacist ideology are responsible for their actions" (193).

This brings up some questions. Is everyone really responsible for his or her own actions? Are we responsible for the actions we take at all times? How can we take responsibil-

ity for something about which we are not aware? We should not forget or minimize the real importance of a fundamental fact in the history of racism anywhere in the world, or the reactions this has produced. The real alienation that racism generates in many people, as well as coaction and oppression, particularly when it has been practiced and broadly applied for centuries, has limited the self-realization of dozens of generations.

The authors are very precise in their proposed solutions for the national problem: "The final and definitive step towards national integration in Cuba is for the black and mulatto elites to gain proportional access to positions of power (this was interrupted by the 1912 massacre of blacks, and massive white immigration from Spain). They must move towards political participation and democracy, if by this we mean a better distribution and circulation of political power and materials. To achieve this, we need to change the existing static and rationalized social hierarchies, and sociological barriers, to make way for the emergence of new social groups originating from the black and mulatto masses" (214-15). Few who are interested in the race problem would oppose these two authors' ideas. Most would agree on the fact that "one of the greatest challenges is to fight a prejudice that is both current and multi-variously fueled by our historical collective imaginary, via the mass media" (216). Moreover, there is still no consensus about one more issue. While we agree that the problem affects the entire nation, there is still disagreement about whether it is "whites or blacks who should offer the solutions," e.g., the first step to be taken to start to resolve this problem is that the non-white population start to organize into groups and organizations that contain white members who understand the root of the problem" (216).

We have not yet come to totally understand that the race problem is a national problem, or that it affects whites, and black or mulattoes, differently. Our increased biological miscegenation may have further complicated the issue, but we still can't say that the entire population always or necessarily understands this.

Regardless of color, many believe that this problem belongs exclusively to backward and inhibited blacks. A few even believe that only blacks and mulattoes can solve a problem that is only theirs. There are some who are proposing a black revolution, with a view to building a nation only for blacks and mulattoes. Others, including some who are either unaware or aware of the problem, and don't understand its deep, tragic affects, are certain that the solution should come from whites, because their black-mulatto compatriots are too passionate about it, and cannot be objective. The first and last proposals are evidence of the persistent "fear of blacks."

"Racism in Cuba could be quickly resolved, if there were a genuine political and ideological will on the part of the dominant elite to help this process progress without too many obstacles. All it would have to do is promote a deconstruction of the ideology of white supremacy (something it does not seem willing to do)" (217). This assertion holds the key to the problem's positive or negative unraveling. It supports the notion that we need to deconstruct the social framework we have inherited, fueled, and even perhaps rejected. In some way, we have all contributed to its continued existence and reproduction, or to an effort to not sustain the current social order.

Almost an epilogue

I would like to warn the reader that this book is not a caprice on the part of its authors,

nor is it a work that was commissioned by the subversive enemy (as is often expressed in Cuba, when research is carried out by Cubans who live outside the country, especially in the United States). It serves as an announcement and forecast concerning an issue that is fundamental for Cuba, for Afro-Indo-Spanish America, and for the world. This is because as a controlling and repressive mechanism for enforcing *biopolitics*, with its false belief in the racially inherited, congenital racial "inferiority and superiority" of some, was surreptitiously applied in this hemisphere after Columbus's first voyage (21).

Opportunely, we are shown a form of racism "that while having undergone diverse metamorphoses through subsequent centuries, is still alive and well, a decade into the new millennium. It continues to be the foremost social, political, economic, legal and cultural problem facing the still inchoate Cuban nation" (26). Iván César Martínez and Juan F. Benemelis are practically unknown in Cuba, after decades of living outside the country, although they have obviously not been forgotten by members of their generation and, fortunately, by members of the later generations that are implicated in their study, too. Many of them are beginning to know them through their efforts against anti-black racism. Both of them have joined their fate to that of their nation, of their country. With their book, they have done their part by offering us one possible narrative through which to reevaluate Cubanness, and a reference book, a contribution to the polemic, a possible platform for action.

It is up to us—millions of Cubans both on the island and spread throughout many, disparate geographies—to do our part, to act, and follow the paths the book outlines, in search of a real historical narrative. It encourages us to reread the one we have been earlier given and told it was an absolute truth. Above

all, we must become more active in the reconstruction of our national identity, one free of marginalizations and exclusions of any sort—not political, economic, ethnic, racial, or gender-based, or any other. Only in this way will we finally be able to take on the historic responsibility of becoming the better Cubans we should and must be. The creation of a *mestizo*, truly integrated and integrating Cuban nation, has purposely been delayed for cen-

turies, due to the cruelty of the white, *crillo* elite's interests. Yet, it can wait no more. This is the fundamental lesson this reader got from rereading Iván César Martínez and Juan F. Benemelis. I am grateful to them both, as a black Cuban woman and scholar.

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