

A Dialogue Within the Race Debate in Cuba: Affirmative Action or Citizen Reempowerment?

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Organizations and societies like the Club Atenas, officially closed after 1959, were symbolic of the black and mestizo population's civic activities, and contributed to their social, political, economic and cultural standing.

Social positioning is always related to power. My understanding of social positioning is that it is a place that one occupies at three different levels: political, economic and cultural. This last level is essential, as it represents a symbolic dimension of signs and representations that allow one to create and recreate the perspective social groups share amongst themselves, which academia calls the imaginary.

This dimension is so important that Greco-French philosopher Cornelius Castoriadis asserted that everything in culture depends on whatever was in a society's earlier imaginary. Of course, for example, if a social group believes itself superior, it is going to strive to project itself as if it were. Hence, we have a reality different from the one we'd perceive if people's perception and imaginary saw the opposite—with that same social group seeing itself as inferior.

The notion of a group's superiority depends on an internalized notion of the inferiority of the other. History is more the result of this symbolic-cultural interaction than the development of production and its role in the economy. The role of work in a human's anthropological possibilities, a role that is well documented, in one thing, but that of the economy's role and the wealth it contributes to history and culture is quite another.

One can find a great number of 'barbaric' peoples that conquered technologically and economically superior peoples in the annals of history than contrary examples. In the context of a cultural debate, few ask themselves why superior Italy was never able to conquer inferior Ethiopia or Somalia, or why in the twentieth century Vietnam was able to resist the world's greatest power—the United States.

The answer in both cases is ideological. The justice in the efforts of poor people, and their valor—also understood as rage—is inspired by just causes. Even if we ignore these rationalizations, a form of thought many of these peoples lacked, there is still a relevant detail: the place that each culture assigns itself within their specific worldview. This place depends on how they represent themselves, all symbols, and an ancestral knowledge and acknowledgment that each group has as its



Inner corridor, Club Atenas

historical and cultural record. This very much brings to mind the Ashanti people in what is today Ghana, and their self-understanding and high level of sophistication within their own worldview.

If anthropologists have it right it's because they've been able to show that economics explains little with regard to historical cultural and civilization. It would be good, useful and psychologically transformative if blacks and *mestizos* in Cuba knew that they were robbed of important social, cultural, intellectual, political and economic power at least twice in our history (1844 and 1959). Introspection and self-awareness, as well as self-representation were made difficult by this situation, which is quite different from our current one.

It would also be better for them to understand that this repeated loss was possible only because of our society's earlier 'view' or 'imaginary', that is, the imaginary that the hegemonic group was earlier able to establish and maintain. If this were not the case, the impact of blacks and *mestizos* on the social, cultural, economic and political construction of Cuba would be seen as impressive. For

example, few people stop to think about the added value that African originated symbolism and aesthetics, which are intricately linked, could contribute to a new economy based on mass-produced crafts. Yet, an identity shaped by the oppressors' imaginary, without which it is impossible to establish hegemony in history and culture, pedagogically obscures who blacks and *mestizos* are; what their role was throughout the country's history, and in its culture; what sociological imprint they've had or still have in terms of demographics. Without looking at the contradictions between our history, the State model, and the island's endogenous culture, we cannot properly speak about a Cuban nation in the twenty-first century.

The existence of an identity based on the dominant imaginary helps us understand the lengthy periods of culturization that took place throughout the history of our authoritarian models of government. Dictatorship, autocracy, totalitarianism, monarchic temptations, and sultanistic attempts have gone beyond a way for a particular culture to express itself. Above all, they are the cultural and political response of a hegemonic *criollo* elite to the democratic polytheism of blacks and *mestizos*, whose cultural strength in Cuba has only found a space of its own in religion and festivals.

When blacks and *mestizos* rebelled in 1884 against those who had "evangelized" them, the brutal repression that ensued caused them to lose their prominent place in Cuban society. In 1912, when they protested against a power they themselves had helped to put in place, they were massacred for showing their impatience with the "generosity" of those who "constructed" the bases of the Republic. When they were targeted by those who embraced the very same imaginary as the group

they needed to redeem via the total revolution of 1959, blacks and *mestizos* had to accept a whitewashing of their own culture, that is, of their legacy, in exchange for what was promised: emancipation.

No part of this imaginary has anything to do with the realities of our culture's processes. Only a small part of it coincides at all with this culture's sociological and historic development. By 1959, most blacks were poor and discriminated, but so were poor whites. This means there was a minority comprised of blacks and *mestizos* who were rich and "cultured," although not to the level that whites were, and this minority of whites also controlled symbolic power. Thus, racial discrimination required blacks to have social and cultural skills they had been honing—in conditions of total disadvantage—since the early nineteenth century. Despite the disruptive violence of 1844, they functioned as referents of racial and cultural self-emancipation well-defined by the middle of the twentieth century.

In other words, blacks and *mestizos* had power in 1959, a kind of power that can only be constructed culturally, through historical accumulation. Yet, that imaginary continues imposing itself on issues involving readjusting racial imbalances via its own hegemonic mechanisms. In the past, it was evangelization, then later crumbs were offered for a specific, heroic contribution to our independence effort, and finally our contemporary "revolutionary" emancipation. Notwithstanding, its incapacity to understand and see the difference of 'others' is busy trying to reproduce that very same imaginary by the intellectual appropriation of so-called affirmative action.

Interestingly, that symbolic form of thinking will do whatever it takes to guarantee its hegemony, even if it is essentially contradicting the image that is being projected out

to the world. It is importing affirmative action as a proposed way to diminish inequalities, and simultaneously exporting other forms of affirmative action: an educational model, for example, which is supposed to correct similar inequalities elsewhere in the world. No one seems to care about how contradictory it is to import foreign solutions and export failed and foreign ones to others.

Thus, is affirmative action appropriate for Cuba? In certain ways, only applicable as a momentary policy, I think not, as it is not for societies built on symmetrical diversity. In these sorts of societies, affirmative action is akin to a philanthropic power elite when it wants to reduce the scandalous level of inequality to preserve and legitimate its power. It is a way for it to continue to be able to subordinate subalterns while understanding that those 'others' are not really who they are: a minority with its own qualities and cultural specificity that has not been able to insert itself into society's mainstream. In political and cultural terms, this would mean two things: that the model and system would have sufficient flexibility to meet the demands and needs of the forgotten (it is true that this is relatively possible in open societies, although it is relatively unsatisfactory socially) and that, consequently, the system's bases would be unquestionable.

I am assuming that Cuba needs to reconsider two related things, its State model—rigid as they come—and its nation-building project, which is culturally exclusionary, among other things, because it has not solved the basic problem of racial integration. In view of this double historic need, affirmative action is only a gradually relieving policy that comes with a potential price: replace surgery with medication, that is, take the solution as its basic way in which to solve a problem that

has become prolonged and rooted because of earlier attempts at "affirmative actions." This apparently positive image would obscure and delay the appropriate political response: re-empowerment. So, if everyone is convinced that Cuba needs to globally restructure its economic model—and its cultural and political model, too—at least for those of us who think democratically—it seems a contradiction of thought and action to propose ameliorating platitudes for a race problem that affects all the country's structures.

This would be a serious way of updating that *criollo* mentality, which has not two but three minds about the black problem—as a minor issue, as an issue that should await the resolution of others, and as an issue that should be punished by law or silencing, given the fact that there are "collateral" problems the country should be facing in this time of crisis. This way of thinking reflects just how ahistorical the current *criollo* elite is in Cuba. It is trapped by a strategy of resistance we still endure that is modeled according to the perspective of those who "taught Cuba how to think": José Antonio Saco *et al.* I aim my queries at those of us who see the race issue as a structural and structuring one, and whether or not a legal solution is equal to a historic solution. Yet, we must urgently and quickly get beyond that *criollo* model and use all the evidence possible to affirm that those nineteenth-century men who represent our historical pantheon only intelligently considered half of Cuba. The more I read about the black and *mestizo*, modest and petite bourgeoisie of the early nineteenth century, the more I realize that an examination of this sociological group is not only about historical justice, but also about a very Cuban economic model. Its practices embodied a very modern and capitalistic view that was substantially distant



Tribute to Juan Gualberto Gómez. Club Atenas

from Spanish-style mercantilism, a form that is found once again in the twenty-first century.

Affirmative actions, also known as positive actions, came about legally in the United States as a result of a particular set of racial circumstances that have required State intervention on behalf of minorities, to make real and genuine the rights the Constitution guaranteed but were for so long violated. Their use has spread all throughout constitutional states in Europe and Latin America, which have been inspired by this new dynamic that the State of Law such as it was conceived by the founding fathers of this concept must be conferred on citizens: German jurists Lorenz Von Stein formulated the theory in 1850, and Herman Robert Heller, essentially creates a model using this idea of State of Law and formulates within it a social fusion that for the first time is endorsed by the Basic Law for the Federal Republic of Germany (1949).

We would do well to remember that in the United States, affirmative action started as a measure meant to eliminate race-based discrimination in employment, following nineteenth-century constitutional law, which sought to eliminate legal distinctions between citizens based on their race. If we reduce it to a concept to better understand this, we can adopt what Colombian jurists Fabio Her-

nando Galán Sánchez and Juan de Dios Luna Cijanes have said about it: “affirmative action is a provisional right to “demand something” and a right meant to ensure that “something already proposed or given” actually be delivered on. It is any measure that promotes, drives, acknowledges, foments, compensates and corrects whose purpose is some committed action. On the negative side, this action on the part of the State is meant to protect people against discriminatory behaviors; on the positive, it presents the State as the agent of material equality via the elimination of actual inequalities, the implementation of government policies, and the promotion of laws regarding promotional equality.”²

Seen this way, affirmative action suffers from a serious difficulty: the modern legal arena is by nature focused on individuals. It sees only the relationship between the individual and the State, as it should be, so it can only guarantee, though not fully, the negative sense of this concept: the omission of discriminatory conduct on the part of the State, or punishment of that kind of behavior in other social actors. In positive sense, being an agent of material equality, can only be partially satisfied, as the history of affirmative action in its place of origin shows, as does that of other places where it has been or continues being applied.



Basketball team. Club Atenas, 1931

I am not trying to say that affirmative action should be tossed aside because of its particular inability to globally satisfy the needs of minorities. I only want to highlight that it should not be the core of any policy of historic compensation for marginalized peoples, precisely because it is essentially aimed at minorities, and depends on the legal system's ability to establish order in human affairs—a legal measure meant to regulate that individual-State relationship, such as it should be in a modern and civilized society. Nevertheless, affirmative action has met some of its goals regarding legal and social equality in the United States, Colombia, European nations (where it is known as positive action and, in fact, they are not both the same), and most recently in Brazil, where, not too surprisingly, affirmative action had to find a place in the government's budget to deal specifically with issues of raciality: a political confirmation

that a minority cannot be treated as though it were just that, a minority.

To what can we attribute the relative success of affirmative or positive action in those countries? The fact they are countries whose diversity is asymmetrical: the minorities are demographically, sociologically and paradigmatically really minorities. What this means is that the integrative global references that allow the social mentality and actions to make sense belong to the groups in the majority and not in the minority. These asymmetric situations allow the law's corrective action to be more or less immediately successful for minority groups, and, even more basic, they makes them visible vis-à-vis their own population. If the effect of all affirmative actions on the minority when compared to the total population is small, it is always almost always great on the minority itself. In places where it has been successful, this gives affirmative action the sort of

marketing power that has generated protests from majority groups, because it is now they who feel discriminated.

As regards the negative aspect of law, the benefit is a net total, because it prohibits the State, or specific other actors, from committing ethnic or racial crimes. The fact that there are places where the law is observed and respected, and there is no discrimination, has a global effect on minorities because they are minorities. Even in places where the law is only partially respected, its violation becomes so visible that it has a positive effect on affirmative action. It shows its validity precisely when it is denied.

In the positive sense of the law, the benefit it offers has been limited up until now. Since it involves trying to implement policies for creating material and social equality, the possibility of their success depends upon the State and community's resources (the concept of subsidies) to satisfy the equalization or guarantee the promotion of social policies. This explains why States tend to legislate affirmative actions policies, so they don't have to depend on the will of governments concerned with actual existing resources.

When practiced, in a positive sense, affirmative action tends to benefit a minority within a minority, and generates and reproduces not only indirect exclusion, but also creates conflicts between individuals or groups according to abilities. This is one of the reasons that these types of policies are grouped under the concept of positive action in Europe: the idea is to try to promote it so long as the candidates demonstrate equally matched skills for the job or can equally benefit from any promotion. Affirmative action in the United States has moved towards this corrective action, verifying the abilities of the potential beneficiaries before they obtain favors from the in-

stitutions or the State. This strengthens affirmative actions' individualizing tendency, but paradoxically reproduces and drives deeper the discriminatory attitudes of the majority vis-à-vis historically marginalized minorities, which is tantamount to going back to where things started despite good intentions.

Nevertheless, the success or failure of affirmative action represents the success or failure of the State's collateral policies, or the governments that promote them, independently of the centrality of the means by which this sort of action is provided. For States and governments and, more importantly, for social stability, everything depends on the global sensitivity to the problems of minorities. When a minority is in a position to destabilize a society, the society needs to have the capacity to absorb and neutralize it by satisfying a minority within it, as in the United States. If some element in addition to the minority in that country reaps the benefits, it is because it has a power acquired through a social and political process in which affirmative action has had an important role: reaffirm a value recognized by the Constitution: that all men were created equal, no small thing in exclusionary, racist societies.

There is an important point here: affirmative action strengthens the dependency of citizens in any given State, but it should invigorate their self-reliance. So, how to deal with these types of policies in societies like Cuba's, that are symmetrically diverse? Asymmetrical hunger is inconceivable in a rich society. Its symmetry represents a breakdown in a society that is no longer wealthy: its inability to produce food for a large part of society stems from the fact it marginalized it.

Brazil provides us an excellent example for contrasting the value of affirmative action. Aware of its limitations, the Lula government

created a ministry to deal directly with this problem. Even more aware of the fact that his society's problems were structural, he implemented a program—Zero Hunger—to confront an issue that cannot be resolved by the positive quota policies of affirmative action. This new policy functions more like crutches, and not legs, in his government's strategic view. Not all Brazilians are black, but blacks in Brazil are not a minority.

Affirmative action could be a crutch, but not a strategic plan for confronting the problem of integration and racial inequality. If it only benefits a minority within a minority, as has been demonstrated; if its scope is essentially individualizing and not pro-group; if its success depends on the State's resources; if its implementation requires distinguishing between people's abilities; if there is a desire to avoid qualitative, quota-meeting measures, as is currently the case with the Cuban Communist Party's Central Committee's inclusion of blacks solely because of their race, then the effect of this affirmative action would be virulently negative because in Cuba, the potential beneficiaries are something like a majority.

The apparent solution could become an additional problem in Cuba, because quota policies, which is the effective way that affirmative action functions positively, create a double illusion, one that is participatory, and another that is equalizing. Because this illusion does not deal with the racial majority, both of its manifestations cover up the basic problem of racial reparation and integration. That is, what we would have would be only a partial solution that might satisfy a minority of blacks within the larger group of blacks, all in the context of a perceived and projected white majority. Either affirmative action is for all the needy and should benefit all blacks, or it is for a minority, as occurs with all af-

firmative action, and leaves the majority by the wayside, which has actually happened and still happens in Cuba. One third of blacks and *mestizos* in Cuba received and receives a benefit that is measurable—becoming atheistic-Marxist-revolutionaries (remember that there are Christians who seem to have power in Cuba, but no Santeros with that same illusion of power). For those who practice religions of African origin, the State is still atheistic regarding political “participation.” Thus, affirmative action has been successfully attempted here with those who can actually function: a minority within a supposed minority, and those who can politically benefit the power structure and its image.

It we try to remain ‘real,’ as they say, which is essential for not losing our objective sense of social reality, what is happening 53 years later is quite interesting. Affirmative action is once again introduced as an intellectual and conceptual novelty for those who are its intended beneficiaries: minorities. This is taking place at a time in which the general consensus about this minority both inside and outside of Cuba is that blacks and *mestizos* are not a minority in the country—despite the census figures. This late assimilation of a foreign concept in a very different context reveals that politics in Cuba is not in touch with sociological reality, which leads it inevitably to come up with solutions that fall short of meeting present and historically accumulated needs. In a positive sense, the kind of policies that affirmative action generates falls short of the State's capacity precisely at a time when blacks and *mestizos* would need more resources to eradicate inequalities. The putative majority, such as it perceived itself prior to 1959, is now a real majority historically unaware of the wealthy black families there were then, or

the hundreds of mediating institutions that participated in civil society.

Affirmative action runs the risk of becoming a rhetorical action by a State that lacks the resources to solve the majority's problems. At this time, the State is abandoning its social responsibility. How could or would it work? Only negatively, and it would be necessary to complement what the Cuban Constitution—a constitution that has led many to say that there is no racial discrimination in Cuba—acknowledges and establishes regarding discrimination.

If social justice cannot result from the employment of foreign policies, what can be done? Here is my proposal: advance historical justice with our own policies, with something called *reempowerment*. My definition of *reempowerment* is that it is a combination of policies that promote the autonomy of social actors by acknowledging their constitutive ability to construct their identities, and their right to define and participate in the State's political will from those constitutive identities. The prefix *re* in the definition is reflective of the fact that this process should involve a critical recovery of the past in Cuba. At a time when Cuba is recovering golf courses, it seems to me an act of historical justice to recover the black and *mestizo* institutions that existed prior to 1959. This phenomenon of recovery, and not return, is really impressive in religion, to the point that one could say—unhesitatingly—that Santería is the only true national religion there is in Cuba. It would be important to also start recovery of economic, social, intellectual, cultural and political memory as a way to *reempower* citizens to fortify the self-esteem and relocation of blacks and *mestizos* in Cuban history. If affirmative action should not be the mainstay with which to find solu-

tions to our race problems, it is because it once again obscures our role in political history and in the journey towards the construction of a Cuban national culture.

Affirmative action strengthens the idea that blacks in Cuba are destined to depend exclusively on *criollo* political power, just as we have been taught to believe that our options and possibilities in Cuba depended on how the *criollo* elite define them. Education is responsible for making us believe that we more or less depend on the place and options others facilitate for us. Yet, the reality is that we've more or less depended on unknown, essentially hidden and persistently repressed place and options we have given ourselves. My basic thesis is that blacks in Cuba are the islands natives, not in physically, geographical, or anthropological sense, but in a cultural one. Since the indigenous people were essentially exterminated, blacks were forced to come and, in essence, be their cultural substitutes. A *cultural native* is limited by technology, culture, power, and his or her ability to choose new places to settle. They are forced to readjust their mental, cultural, symbolic, psychological and physical capacities to their limited world, and cannot displace it. Now and before, most blacks do not have the option of emigrating. They are forced to stay and physically become part of their national territory. This cultural condition has a very notable impact on the construction of the Cuban diet and religious symbolism, both of which corresponded quite well with their new ecological environment.

It is still noteworthy that Cuba's predominant economic practices all throughout its history correlate to the mentality of those who had and have the possibility of emigrating. This mentality is one of a shared, dual territorial situation that opens frontiers for them and, as a result, makes them think

that they can make money quickly and easily. This pecuniary and commercial view of things, which was historically nurtured by the arrival of Spaniards and Chinese, is contrary to the productivist view of those who plan to exploit options regarding place of residence because there are not other places to go.

The Cuban sugar elite is one notable exception, but it is responsible for forging Cuba wealth by considering it more an economic space than a cultural nation. This explains why it broadly supported the idea of annexation, not because it was treasonous, but rather it saw Cuba as a living and constant, open and diffuse frontier, like early *postnationalists*. Cuba's late independence is no coincidence. Yet, *reempowerment* should not be understood solely in terms of historical justice, as a way to gradually reinvent ourselves from our legacy. Instead, it should be viewed as free of a philosophy that requires us to be eternally grateful, and also as a way to modernize policies that would allow us to fulfill two unfinished tasks, both of which are very necessary: the democratization of the State and the completion of our nation-building project. In this sense, we blacks and *mestizos* have a specific mission to carry out not more than whites, but equally with them: to *un-creolize* Cuba.

The creation of a new political citizen is essential to this effort. Essential, too, is that his or her sphere of action be a well defined and culturally sophisticated democracy. Affirmative action is an obstacle to this. We know this can only be achieved legalistically, in a negative sense, by protecting certain rights, and in a positive send, by legalizing the State's actions towards establishing material and social equality. I don't think that importance of laws in a democratic and civilized country is enough to reduce politi-

cal and civic action to the possibilities parliamentary legislation offer.

This analysis is based upon a definition of affirmative action as: "a right to 'demand something' and a right to an assurance that 'something already determined' happen..." In terms of the individual-State relationship modern law demands, affirmative action makes possible only two of the four statutes that regulate this relationship. The *status subjectionis* (subjection or subjectness) does not acknowledge any subjective rights and projects on humans a relationship with the State. The (positive) *status civitatis* begins to constitute him or herself as an individual only because it can invoke the State to guarantee his or her demand, or protect him or her from a violation of the law (discrimination). The other statuses, *libertatis*, which guarantees individual autonomy (what is known as a negative freedom that protects individuals from State intervention) and the (active) *activae civitatis*, which acknowledges a citizen's right to shape the State's will, are undermined by affirmative action.

These last two statuses are essential to cultural identity, a reappropriation of a legacy, and definition of place and political arenas according to their own cultural content, and in dialog with other identities. *Reempowerment* is directly linked to these. I am trying to assert that black Cubans need to be politically liberal if they are to defend and recover their cultural identity before *criollo* power. For historical reasons, affirmative action is possible because of the existence and previous vigor of the *status libertatis*, which guaranteed marginalized people the use of their own voices, and sets into motion the system's gears for the protection of their "excessive" demands. The problem arises when the demands of the needy are defined by the providers (the State) and not by the needy themselves. This is the risk

that goes with using affirmative action as the mainstay of the individual-State relationship. At this stage of the political game our guaranteed identity is strengthening our active status, the only thing that makes possible a redefinition of our corresponding place after 500 years of historico-cultural pretermission.

We have accepted that Cuban *criollos* see themselves as a tropical version of WASPs² (the cultural mainstream in the diverse United States), even if they are not. To reempower

ourselves this way is to reaffirm ourselves through actions, recovering our intrinsically democratic, rich, *counter*-hegemonic, tolerant, pragmatic, postmodern and flexible imaginary, instead of passively waiting for the uncertain results of the affirmative actions of the usual suspects. It is the best way to complete the nation and win democracy for everyone via self-liberation. We must not forget the force and idea that establishing an imagined society entails.

Notes:

1- Galán Sánchez, Juan de Dios, Fabio Hernando and Luna Cijanes. *La acción afirmativa como desarrollo del principio de igualdad*. Bogotá: Pontificia Universidad Javeriana, 2000: 140.

2- The initials mean white, Anglo-Saxon Protestant, that is, the inventors, in every way possible, of the current United States...for now.