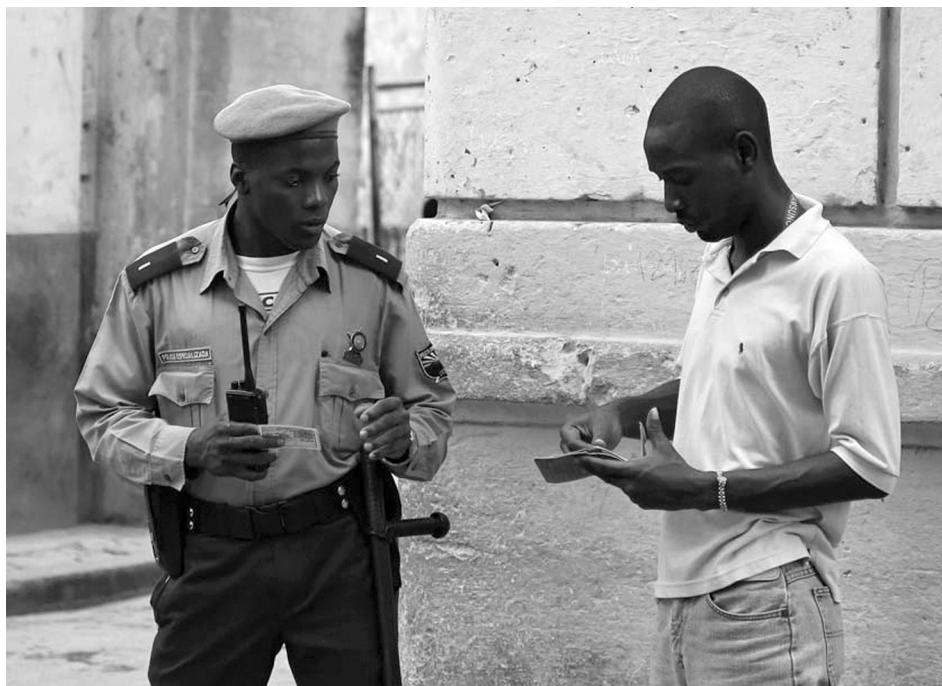


Occupational Hazards?

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“**B**lack and from Oriente, and a cop! That’s too much!” It is quite common to hear this pejorative exclamation on the streets of Havana. It’s a way of outright expressing everything worth rejecting in one phrase containing three prejudices—racial, regionalist and anti-governmental—that have plagued Cubans for centuries. The only difference that makes this worse today is that current circumstances representative of our perennial economic and sociopolitical calamities mixes them all together now.

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We already know that among the myriad disadvantages white hegemony imposed on Cuban blacks since our earliest history as a nation, a constant one has been great difficulty in gaining access to the best paid and, well, most dignified jobs. It is more than well known that this is the reason for the historical tendency of blacks and *mestizos* to look to certain, uniformed state groups and forces for gainful employment, because it is not difficult for them to get hired. There tend to be more positions than there are applicants. There aren’t (nor

were there ever) many who could aspire to a more highly regarded occupation, thus they prefer being policemen, soldiers or firemen.

If we read prestigious historian Pedro Deschamps Chapeaux's work, we will discover that in colonial times African descendants often sought to enlist in the *Pardo and Moreno* [Brown and Black] Battalions to secure their freedom, even before slavery was institutionally abolished. This method was devised by Spain so it could use blacks as cannon fodder while defending its possessions against attacks by pirates and corsaires, and even against threats from foreign powers. Likewise, it was also another way to subjugate them while offering them certain benefits: military privileges, pensions or preferences for some jobs. Naturally, this was always offered under strict circumstances, and from a perspective in which blacks ended up suffering, just the same—even if their were more or less free soldiers or officers—enduring the same, humiliating, colonial mentality, thanks to the military's divisive strategies.

Yet, despite the fact that they were racialized and exploited, the men who joined those *Pardo y Moreno* battalions found them to be a space where they could develop their reciprocal and solidaristic relationships, and exchange ideas and projects. Above all, those battalions helped blacks to gather for the purpose of participating in the most important organization for them at the time—cabildos—that marked the moment when their place in Havana's economy boomed—the nineteenth century.

This may explain why Cuban blacks continued enlisting in uniformed corps both during the colonial period and after the birth of the Republic, their numbers being greater or lesser according to the hegemonic tensions of the moment. Another explanation for this

mass enlisting could be because there were obstacles keeping them from finding employment, despite the fact they would inevitably have to face discrimination in these corps, too. Thus, it seems historically relevant that they are once again in the majority among the ranks of the national police force, particularly those contingents assigned to Havana.

Yet, this new situation goes far beyond being just a historical repetition, because various factors make it much more complicated. It is not just about all the time that has passed since colonial and republican times till now. It is not complicated only when one considers the fifty years of energy that have been wasted by a government that has always projected itself publicly as anti-racist and as having given blacks the rights they deserved.

The large presence of blacks in today's police force does not benefit them socially, at least when it comes to racial solidarity, which seems somehow contradictory and even anti-historical. Seen in this manner, it would seem they lost ground when compared to the gains they used to make while they were in the *Pardos y Morenos* Battalions.

When no one wants to be a cop

We must always speak empirically or speculatively when referring to phenomena that occurred in Cuba during recent decades, about which it is impossible to consult statistics because there are none, or we have no access to them. Government agencies only produce data favorable to them, or information that for some reason is considered admissible to their way of writing history. This is one of the obstacles our present-day, impartial chroniclers must face. Worse yet, it may mean an even greater, perhaps irremediable limitation for future historians. It is hardly neces-

sary to highlight the fact that it is impossible to know just how many blacks and whites serve in the National Revolutionary Police (PNR). Even though it is hard to visually confirm this, we do know that there are a notably greater number of blacks and *mestizos*, as well as easterners among them. Yet, what is really remarkable with regard to blacks is that memory tells us that there numbers in the PNR were not always so great during what we call the Revolutionary period. In previous decades—the sixties and seventies—there were times when they were not the majority. Might their chances of employment have improved? Or, is it the case that because they were much more integrated into the Revolutionary process—much more than today—their expectations regarding economic progress and a standard of living allowed them to find other, more hopeful paths towards them? Could it be the government was not interested in increasing the number of blacks in its police force during the Revolution's earliest years?

We may not be able to answer these questions using scientific fundamentals. Yet, it would be valuable if historians tried to do so, because the results would be so important. It would be quite difficult to undertake this, but so would many other things they'd have to face in the future, which is no longer so far off. What we suddenly do know is that the PNR's social goals of the sixties and seventies have changed. It may bear the same name and appearance, and not changed at all structurally, it is today nothing like it was. It was a uniformed institution whose mission it was to protect the public order and security within a country that was in the midst of more or less efficient, enormous social and economic transformation—always within a Revolutionary context. The PNR now serves a dictatorship in a very repressive way. There is no way this

could have happened without it developing increasing antipathy towards the public. Worse yet, this implication is actually part of a classic vicious circle. The older and more unjust the dictatorship grows, the greater its rejection of the public, the more continuous and uncontrolled will be its police repression. In addition, the public's perception that it no longer deserves its respect and consideration will also grow.

It should not surprise us that fewer and fewer people are seeking employment with the PNR at this time. No one wants to be a cop anymore, especially in Havana, where the repression is worse, and at a time when the government needs even more police officers. It is no wonder that it is now offering material advantages to those willing to join up, something that has never happened in Revolutionary Cuba before. Nowadays, a Cuban police officer earns more money than a doctor or other professional, and much more than a factory worker. In addition, those that are placed in materially advantageous positions also get privileges. Yet, not even these measures have managed to have the supply of applications come close to meeting the demand, especially among capital city dwellers. This is precisely why this terrible situation makes the government increase their ranks with large numbers of young, mostly black and *mestizo* men from the island's interior.

Occupational hazards?

This situation is very difficult, and probably quite uncomfortable for those organizations that struggle against the racial discrimination that has been increasing or once again becoming prevalent in Cuba recently. If in the midst of today's chaotic expectations, changes in the number of State jobs available, and the

economic crisis someone started to publicly denounce that what was occurring was discriminatory against blacks, particularly the hiring of so many from the interior (where the poverty is absolutely overwhelmingly desperate) into secure and well-paid positions, the least that would happen is that he or she would receive a very loud 'Bronx cheer,' even from those he or she was trying to defend.

Its complexity makes this topic so complicated. During the Revolutionary period, one could probably count on the fingers of one hand (and you'd probably have left over ones) the number of opportunities such as the one the PNR offers the descendants of Cubans slaves today, particularly those from the interior. They are now easily able to find employment, an above average salary, easy lodging, and even the ability to purchase homes in the capital. Yet, they are also able to continue to guarantee their status as poor people, and have many of their problems solved—and their physical and intellectual abilities aren't even overexploited. This reveals one of the government's more damaging, discriminatory attitudes against slave descendants, grave still when it is subtle and misleading, even when it seems less premeditated or more like good luck.

It is essentially a racist operation and, in light of anti-racist claims, can be seen as extremely indolent to create a black majority police force precisely at a time when that corps has lost so much support from the populace. One could at the very least think this an irresponsible policy, given the people who created it (who should know better, since they live in Cuba) probably know that it would be seen as the product of discriminatory whites. No wonder the word on the street is that just as the government is trying to bring about a 'cosmetic' correction towards more racial bal-

ance—at least in cold numbers—in certain State jobs or positions that involve lots of public exposure, e.g., on television, another essentially racist joke that is circulating in Havana suggests that perhaps the opposite should happen in the PNR's rank and file (that more whites should join), i.e., if the intention is really to avoid black policemen from becoming—due to prejudice—policemen of blacks worthy of people saying "they're too much."

As if that weren't enough, the unprecedented increase in the number of black police officers at a time when Cuba is experiencing a systemic collapse and social unrest is an aggression directed right at the sensitive core of the racist problem: brotherhood and solidarity among blacks as a group, a value they have been able to preserve against all odds, even at history's most traumatic and calamitous moments.

Has it not been sufficiently established that blacks are among the Cuban police force's most harassed and brutalized victims? Isn't the fact that a very notable number of blacks actively participate in the country's movement for peaceful opposition movement also widely known? Haven't some of these people also emerged as outstanding and even exemplary dissidents, whether they are political prisoners, or hunger strikers, or party leaders, or even participants in peaceful street encounters with police forces and other hordes that receive orders from the Interior Ministry?

In seeing things this way—which is the way they are, no doubt—this disproportionate increase in black police officers (where or not it was premeditated by the government) situate members of the socio-racial group at hostile and perhaps irreconcilable odds. In colonial times, the authorities would have considered blacks questioning the benefits

their brothers derived from participating in the *Batallón de Pardos y Morenos* as ungrateful, arbitrary and inconsiderate. The government's reaction towards those who complain about the PNR's unusually high recruitment of blacks is no different today (as has already been established). Is it possible that those in power are so organically racist that they cannot see how absurdly racist this is? Not too long ago, I had a personal conversation with a black official in the Interior Ministry. I would have preferred to keep my distance from him, but I had no choice. I told him how damaging that majority presence in the PNR was for Cuban blacks. His answer was that being a police officer is just one of many jobs and that blacks, or any Cubans, should feel privileged if they are able to obtain a good paying job at a time when there is so much unemployment in other parts of the world. I more or less countered that there is no price on repressive actions, that neither money nor anything else could make up for a loss of prestige that comes with becoming an abuser of defenseless women and men. I also went on to say it made one feel like crying to see those poor young men, who due to their ignorance, manipulation and hoodwinking, are violating a behavioral golden rule they inherited from their ancestors, that has been passed down to them centuries. The golden rule? Affective communication and racial solidarity. In his attempt to put an end to our conversation, and also make a point, this official's response was that I was talking nonsense: they are fulfilling their Revolutionary duty. Anything else is an occupational hazard.

I wanted to say that it was really more about the hazards of a racism that was once again being imposed by white hegemony, but he cut me off. Continuing the discussion also wouldn't have gotten me very far. The personal radar he uses to culturally and politi-



cally pump himself up—as do so many others in Cuba—are unidirectional. They only pick up signals originating from a pre-established, extremely rigid source. All the rest is static, interference, and noise.

Note:

- 1- Deschamps Chapeaux, P. *El negro en la economía habanera del siglo XIX*. La Habana: Unión de Escritores y Artistas de Cuba, 1971.