

# Affirmative Action: Analysis and Perspectives

Hildebrando Chaviano Montes  
Attorney and independent journalist  
Member, “Juan Gualberto Gómez” Movement for  
*Racial Integration*  
Havana, Cuba

The story of black Cubans is a story of crimes, from the time of their arrival in these lands, and even before, when they were purchased on the coasts of Africa, and they became not only merchandise, but also degraded objects whose human condition suffered degradation. This is the source of what has been called the black problem in Cuba. Does this mean that blacks in and of themselves are a problem, or that their lives are plagued by them, in our country?

At times, both seem to be the case. But there they are, unconcealable and at times undesirable, creating, by their presence, lamentable situations that force non-blacks to pretend they don't see them. Beyond that, in addition, they even lead them to deny blacks access to certain private circles. Can it be that these blacks don't realize that it's okay for them to build hotels but not okay for them to manage them?

Would it be in bad taste for blond and blue-eyed European or Canadian visitors to suddenly have to encounter a front desk clerk or maître d' who was as black as the ace of spades, and who spoke to them in their own language, to boot? They might take it as a joke.

Black and *mestizo* Cubans (the latter term is for the *mulatos* and *jabaos*, however light-skinned they are) constitute the majority, but they have been minimized by centuries of prejudice, fears, and economic interests. The

slave past of blacks in America has stigmatized all their descendants. Somewhere along the line, people have forgotten that prior to being brought here as slaves, black Africans were free in their own lands, freer even than many Spanish convicts who were quickly given their own freedom, with promises of limitless riches in the New World, as a way to get rid of them.

Reparations for that injustice cannot be left to the good will of those in power. Even if there is talk today about how denigrating racism is, tomorrow might bring into view some other task that needs to be prioritized by those currently in political power, meaning that the black problem or, better yet, the problems of blacks, will once again be relegated to a less urgent place on the list.

The victims themselves are faced with obstacles. Blacks don't count for anything in this society. They have no economic or political power, nor institutions to support their demands or struggles. Banned civic groups and movements do not have access to national media outlets or to a justice system that will listen to them. As a result, this invisibilized majority should be supported by something more than official talks, insincere promises, and timid equalizing efforts. For the black civil rights struggle in Cuba to be viable, this population group should receive a legal basis unfettered by

paternalism and independent of passing political interests and fickleness.

What is needed is legislation that establishes affirmative action measures according to the actual proportion of each race, according to the census. To abandon the no longer necessary and hypocritical concept that there are no races because we are all Cubans would be a first step in creating a definitive understanding between white and black Cubans.

There are Cubans in twenty-first century Cuba that are loathe to accept that others with skin darker than theirs have equal access to numerous university or vocational careers, or jobs whose salaries are paid in convertible currency\* and managing positions in sectors like tourism and joint ventures.

Given that the dominant economic and political class is comprised overwhelmingly by whites, blacks urgently need a quota of power they have been denied for centuries. This would be not only a just act, but also a way of promoting improved black self-esteem and a true sense of Cubanness among black citizens. As a point of departure, and as a joint black-white effort, this would allow for true citizen empowerment. This means that black Cubans can and will independently develop their own sense of consciousness, with the protection of a solid constitutional figure like a public defender or ombudsman, and of laws that are known, taught in schools and enforced.

It is up to blacks themselves to take advantage of the opportunities offered by affirmative action. That being said, everything would depend, in great measure, on the efforts and abilities of each and every person while he or she did not have to complete a task more than once, fear being accused of “doing it wrong, no matter what,” or hear the oft repeated “it just had to be that...”

Affirmative action alone cannot solve a problem as tangled and deeply rooted as the

*marabú*\*\* found in the Cuban countryside. The education of citizens and revelation of values shaped by centuries of segregation is essential, as is the need for the mass media to stop transmitting a totally negative image of African peoples.

The Democratic People’s Republic of Korea, which is neither of the ‘people’ or ‘democratic,’ is plagued by endemic famines. Yet, the Cuban media has never even made mention of them, nor of the thousands and thousands of tons of food that the United States, South Korea and other nations have to send there so that millions of North Koreans don’t die of hunger. On the other hand, Africa is only hunger, diseases and illiteracy for Cuban television. Even if there are diverse reasons for these to exist, that is no reason that Cuban television cannot also show the scientific, cultural and economic progress achieved by African nations. This knowledge would help the self-esteem of black Cubans, who are forced to feel ashamed of their roots.

Affirmative action, yes. Citizen empowerment, too, made possible by the opportunities offered by the former, and as a way to insert a black presence in places that till now it has been institutionally denied. Their immediate visibility as useful and capable social subjects also will help to change the typical image of blacks as convicts, athletes, musicians or policemen into one of Cubans with access to full citizenship, in its broadest sense, while still being black, a musician or athlete, of which we are proud, just the same.

**Editor’s notes:**

\*All salaries in Cuba are paid in national currency (CUP). Convertible *pesos* (CUC) can only be gotten as bonuses or incentives.

\*\*Spiny tree belonging to the leguminous family, which has infested the Cuban countryside.