

Racism Today and Yesterday

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Racism involves discrimination in the social order which results in any kind of exclusion, restriction and limitation on the acknowledged equality of all people. It uses in its functioning the accidental connection between human genetic characteristics (phenotype) and the intellectual abilities, social behavior, obvious expressions of personality and culture, and other evidence.

Discrimination is defined principally as exclusion, differentiation, restriction or preference based on racial origin, heritage, or national or ethnic origin. In today's Cuba, as elsewhere around the world, this discrimination goes beyond these categories, because there are different forms motivated by sex, age, sexual orientation, gender, political opinions, social origins, abilities, economic position and religious beliefs.

Race relations in Cuba, and their effects, marked people and defined their social roles throughout history. The consequences are still being felt today. We Cubans feel that the race problem is latent. Blacks suffer from the time they are born on account of it. They are so affronted due to their class, and made to feel awkward because of their social and cultural origins. They are traumatized and full of contradictions that give them no other option but rebellion.

Many are the episodes over so many centuries of slavery. Despite all our efforts, everything falls short because of the severity of the problem. There are too many examples of this, like the brutal repression against the Independent Party of Color, whose members only aspired to obtain justice and acknowledgment for people of the black race.

The image of black people that has developed historically over time is one of repudiation and exclusion, despite the fact the governing elite prattles on about having fought against these prejudices all along. There is no visible progress, and it is sad to see how our society cannot seem to manage to make any in the eradication of the black population's social and economic difference.

The solution to racism in Cuba not only concerns legal equality. Our social consciousness as a society is evolving very slowly, and this is affected even more by objective and subjective factors. The history of our slavery has wrought terrible consequences for us in our effort to assume our identities. There has been no effort to make us feel proud of the social representation of blacks, or the true and important role we played in winning independence for Cuba. We are not made to feel like we belong, nor do we have the physical characteristics to be able to do so. On the contrary,

most often myths—almost all negative—are reinforced and passed down from generation to generation of blacks, in the same way values associated with feelings of inferiority, and a blend of submission and rebelliousness are, too. All this leads to a life of exclusion.

We have borne the stigma of being undervalued blacks for too long. It is time for the view of blacks as the negative side of Cuba's national personality to end. Being black is synonymous with being filthy, ugly, amoral and so many other offensive adjectives in the popular imaginary. This reality has affected our self-esteem, limited our ability to assume our identities and take stock of what and who we are. It is no secret at all that Cuban blacks are bearing the worst part of our current economic crisis. The situation of blacks has always been undermined by an external cause of discrimination in the economic sphere: our skin color.

If we have been able to confront difficult situations over a long period of time, if in our collective consciousness we know that this is not due to some inherited mental problem, but rather to a situation constructed upon prejudices, myths and attitudes, then we must assume our identities and our culture. Let us reclaim our spirituality and confront this erroneous way of representing us. Let us reclaim our culture and customs as a form of resistance and affirming our negritude.

A racial consciousness cannot be lost within a national one. All we Cubans must express ourselves through notions of acceptance, inclusion and respect for racial and cultural diversity. I think we should start by changing the image that many black men and

women have of themselves. We should build up our self-esteem as an essential tool to use in our journey towards recognition, so we can create definitive changes in how we are accepted as an essential element of our society along with white Cuban men and women.

All this is not so we can construct objective identities that have already existed for a long time. It is more about said identities not negatively expressing themselves, about finding social balance amongst different racial groups in Cuban society.

Let us strongly hope that the struggle against racial discrimination and other forms of exclusion will eradicate this scourge in Cuba as well as other parts of the world. Its success depends on those involved in it, and particularly on the stance the victims take.

The best way to achieve goals in a classist and racist, and especially totalitarian society is to impose certain standards on education and esteem building. A change in racist attitudes in Cuba today can only happen when our pending discussion of this difficult subject allows not only reparation of the damage done, but also creates legal and educational mechanisms that sanction all discriminatory actions.

Democracy is the base upon which we can relaunch the opportunity to eliminate exclusionary acts. It is time to continue seriously and deeply examining the problem, always keeping in mind that we want to create a future Cuba with a democratic system that will correct this historic error once and for all, one that will give all Cubans the opportunity to defend their rights, so that inequality can disappear.