

Relevance, Importance and Lessons of Cuban Anti-Racist Thought

Leonardo Calvo Cárdenas
Historian and politician
Vice-President, *Progressive Arc Party* (PARP)
National Vice-Coordinator, *Citizens' Committee for Racial Integration* (CIR)
Havana, Cuba

Yesterday we were slaves, today we are free. We want to take part in life and laws. We want consideration. We reject those vile accusations being launched against us.

Juan Gualberto Gómez
(*La fraternidad*, November 18, 1888).

The racism and disadvantages that black Cubans have historically suffered have become shortcomings and scourges endemic to our society, burdens that have transcended historical periods, situations, political rhetoric, and ideological alienation to become the normal precondition of our sociocultural coexistence. They serve as a yet insurmountable obstacle to the completion of a nation that is ill-defined in its intellectual goals and failed in its sociological structuring.

Dr. Fernando Martínez Heredia, a renowned, government-affiliated, social scien-

tist, once said at an academic meeting a few years ago that blacks had been at the center of our economic processes and struggles for independence. How could it not be so, if they made a huge contribution to wealth creation, and to the construction of the Cuban republic, with their efforts, sweat, blood and heroism. Yet, the big question is: "what has been our place when it was time to define power and prominent socioeconomic spaces? The great contradiction throughout our entire history, beyond situations and circumstances, is that the aforementioned, incredible contribution of black Cubans and their descendants to the socio-cultural structuring of what we know today as Cuba has never been properly acknowledged or valued to the proper degree. What this means is that in our socio-existential imaginary what we have created is a white country from a truly *mestizo* one. What is happening is that those who have made a huge and

determining contribution to the economic, political, and cultural construction of the “nation” are still being seen as subsidiary and disdainable objects in that ‘imagined’ nation.

What many scholars and historians cannot grasp when they study interracial relations in Cuba, and the troubled history of Cuba’s African descendants, is that unlike what happened on most of the continent, black Cubans are not a territorially or culturally isolated minority distant from the nation’s process of socioeconomic and political construction.

A number of historical and socioeconomic circumstances conditioned the specifics of black Cubans’ social presence and participation in these events: a lack of large numbers of indigenous people; the intense, natural, process of miscegenation brought about by single men during the early colonial period; and, the island’s incredible economic development after the end of the eighteenth century.

Different republican governments and the Revolution have constitutionally and discursively conferred equality upon all Cubans. Yet, the true inequality that resulted has now become the norm for a colonialist mentality that stagnates, readapts and reaccommodates itself to all junctures and circumstances. In its spirit, this attitude is even assumed by this inequality’s victims, many of whom must resort to self-esteem, pride and identity as essential tools, and a necessary mindset to be able to wrench from those in power their acknowledgment of the place we have won for ourselves throughout history by dint of our role in and contributions to it. All through our history, many intellectuals, politicians, civic activists, and artists raised their voices to denounce our nation’s immense cultural and structural shortcomings, and point out the causes, essence, harm and dangers found in the

racist framework upon which our *mestizo* nation’s complex coexistence has been modeled.

What’s interesting and far-reaching about all this is that those shortcomings and taboos have been passed on down to us unchanged from colonial times, to republican times, and even to the revolutionary period. Meanwhile, the contributions and efforts of black Cubans were not rewarded with a very necessary change in mindset, one that should see that coexistence in a new light whose inclusive and integrating nature would be seen in an acknowledgment and conditions we black Cubans have not yet been able to enjoy.

In Cuba, there is no fear of a racial war. Men are more than whites, mulattos or Negroes. On the field of battle, dying for Cuba, the souls of whites and Negroes have risen together into the air. In the daily life of defense, loyalty, brotherhood and shrewdness, Negroes have always been there, alongside whites. Cubans are more than whites, mulattoes or Negroes. José Martí, *Patria* (April 19, 1893).

We might call this an example of convenient inexactness. When he expounded upon how beautiful, intelligent, capable, brave, hard-working, and congenial we were, the Apostle should have said ‘there *should* be no race war’ and acknowledge that *criollo* hegemony declared the war without considering Africans or their descendants. Beyond recognizing the importance of his political rhetoric, let’s hope that by the time Martí died he had realized that at the side of every black person there was always a white one to betray and discriminate against him or her. The actions of his own son, seventeen years after the confused tragedy of Dos Ríos (where Martí was killed), speak for themselves.

*No people has ever won its freedom by getting down on its knees before those who enslave them; no one can have rights if he knows not what he has and how to defend it. The times in which we live are such that even ladies do not requite the lovers who kneel at their feet. One does not ask for freedom, or beg for freedom. It must be won. Rights are not doled out by any establishment; rights must be exercised, and belong to all who do so. If we who have them continue to ask for them, we will die waiting, for we will have lost them. Evaristo Estenoz, *Previsión* (August 30, 1908).*

I would have preferred using the lapidary force of quotes like this to instigate debate. Yet, our behavior yesterday, given the arrogantly repressive actions that tried to stop this meeting, and our presence here today, confirm the transcendental nature of this leader's affirmation.

*The answer is serious, but we should still give it. Yes, gentlemen. The black race still has problems in Cuba, and still needs to fight a great deal to resolve them. Equality has not reached some prematurely abandoned trenches, which is precisely where the fight against innumerable prejudices must go on...[the] belief that we live in the best of worlds, in the most democratic of republics, while closing our eyes to the harsh realities and environment. We must take our place in precisely the place we have been situated; see if that is where we really belong as a result of our history and our process. If it is not, then we must immediately move on towards the place we should occupy as children of Cuba. Nicolás Guillén, *Diario de la Marina* (April 21, 1929)*

In light of their Cuban condition, dark men are also burdened with their condition as

*blacks, which limits the first. It is not that the law denies them rights, but that white men acknowledge them few...[Of all] those university graduates, doctors, lawyers, dentists, engineers, etc., that Dr. Martínez sees, so many of them find sometimes insurmountable obstacles on the road to success, and that obstacle is their African heritage. In their reserved and sometimes aggressive attitude towards the darker or lighter nature of their skin color, whites see them as blacks firsts, and then as professionals. Nicolás Guillén, *Diario de la Marina* (June 2, 1929).*

*Now that we have achieved our cultural progress, and possess all the conditions necessary to coexist in a dignified manner in our country, we cordially ask, in a way proper to the peaceful Republic, that we be given an active role in the edifying activities of Cuban civic life (this is not a small-minded thing to those in power), so we can work with them the same way we did when we conspired and fought with them for Cuba's independence: all together and at the same time. Gustavo Urrutia, *Diario de la Marina* (July 8, 1928).*

WHAT IS THIS GREAT PAIN OF WHICH I SO OFTEN SPEAK? IT IS THE PAIN FELT BY BLACKS TODAY IN THIS CUBAN LAND OF MISCEGENATION AND COLOR PREJUDICES. THE PROLETARIAN, CLASS-BASED PAIN OF BLACKS THAT INCREASES DUE TO RACIST PAIN. THEIRS' IS A GENUINE, EXTREME PAIN. BLACK CONSCIOUSNESS SUFFERS THIS GREAT PAIN UPON SEEING THAT WHITE CONSCIOUSNESS DOES NOT REALIZE THAT SO LONG AS A THIRD OF OUR POPULATION REMAINS SUBMERGED IN ALL ITS POVERTY, MISERY, AND SUBORDINATION, CUBANNESS

WILL REMAIN INCOMPLETE. Gustavo Urrutia, *Diario de la Marina* (December 21, 1935).

We carry on so that the majority of blacks can recover their self-esteem. Black Cubans who live truly ashamed of an African heritage that in reality deserves as much attention as the Spanish, are more enslaved, more ignorant, and more unhappy than their African ancestors... [A] citizen of a negroid country who only knows about the white side of his people cannot be seen as properly educated. Gustavo Urrutia, Cuatro charlas radiofónicas, 1935.

It ends up being really surprising that Gustavo Urrutia was able to elucidate for us so long ago the trauma and challenges we face today, and from his conservative position. The reason for these challenges and traumas is because the efforts and talents of black Cubans are not rewarded with the space and access they deserve. We have to be better yet to have an unlikely possibility of being equal. On the other hand, each new readjustment made in our socioeconomic structure and design deepens the trauma, shortcomings, frustrations, and despair of this historically victimized part of the population.

The history of Cuba must be truthful and critical... It is not irreverent to tell the truth. If the Reformers (1862-1868) and Autonomists (1878-1895) were racist, why not write it? If the 1868 revolution did not eliminate forced work till 1871, why say that Céspedes decreed at Demajagua the abolition of slavery? If many of the leaders of the 1868 war, like Céspedes, Agramonte, Cisneros Betancourt, etc., were in favor of the United States incorporating Cuba, why say that from its inception, on October 10th, it was a movement seeking absolute independence

as its one and only goal...? This book denounces the aristocratic, slavist and annexationist tradition, but there is also a popular, egalitarian and anti-annexationist one that should be the one to serve as an example to our current generation. It is the revolutionary tradition of Martí, Gómez and Maceo. Those who both before and now seek a future with social justice, equality, and absolute independence should find inspiration in the words and deeds of these now deceased men. Raúl Cepero Bonilla. Azúcar y abolición [Sugar and Abolition]. Prologue to the Second Edition. Havana, 1959.

These ideas go to the core of one of the greatest obstacles we encounter at a time when we are trying to move the nation forward. If we don't have the intellectual and political courage to openly and fully accept what we have been, and what our path has been throughout our history, if we are not capable of unearthing those uncomfortable schema that for reasons of convenience and opportunism have created a false image of us, it will be extremely difficult for us to construct the modern, prosperous and balanced Cuba of which we have so long dreamt.

I would like to make special mention of Juan René Betancourt, Walterio Carbonell, and Carlos Moore, all of whom have offered the revolutionary government—each from his own perspective, and from his own progressive, revolutionary and leftist position—the key and perfect mechanisms with which to confront the problem and, most importantly, without the atrophy and trauma we now endure and that seriously compromise our present and future coexistence.

The ideas of these distinguished intellectuals were ignored by the high leadership, which punished these thinkers with silence, exile, ostracism, and slander. It also refused

to acknowledge the role and importance of our African heritage in the formation of our national culture, and to create a place for the economic contributions made by black Cubans.

Despite the lapidary and lamentable persistence of these issues and proposals in my small selection of quotes, which span quite a number of decades, one recurring phrase—"the Revolution is what has done the most for blacks"—allows us to visualize the defining philosophy and spirit at the core of our sociological structure as a society. Any proposal that attempts to remove responsibility from that self-made, presentably named power structure, is not taking into account the civic and social achievements of black Cubans during the first half of the last century. Among them, the most important are an elaborate network of associations and organizations, and solid political and union leadership on a local and national scale, all of which was swept away by a revolution that, in its continued representation of machista, *criollo*, hegemonic, racist and antinational values, is still seeing black Cubans as objects for its manipulation or—better yet—of its selfish paternalism. Or, is it the case that we blacks are not part of the Revolution? Perhaps all those thousands of black Cubans who managed to return with their lives—but with traumatized, scarred spirits—from the imperial war adventures with which the high leadership fed that complicated, Birán* high power as long as it could, have been able to see that the Revolution is one thing, and blacks quite another. No one pays any mind to their needs, frustrations, or everyday tragedy.

What is clear is how the race problem was not taken into account by the program of the 26th of July Movement. In the 1960s, the issue was seen as having been resolved. It

was silenced for the assumed, greater unity of the nation. Cultural associations and brotherhoods were suppressed. The seventies saw the promulgation of laws against religions and cultural manifestations of African origin. This denied many exemplary Cubans acknowledgment, new homes—on account of their religious beliefs. Once the 1980s came, the high leadership—under pressure from U.S., black intellectuals who were beginning to see shortcomings and a lack of progress, promoted the co-opting of some elements of black culture for profit, which led to its corruption, due to its anti-scientific, pecuniary nature. The dollarization that took place in the 1990s gave structure to the lack of progress and exclusion of blacks. At this time, contemporary measures intended to modernize our socioeconomic model while still keeping the power structure as it is are widening the gap of inequality and disadvantage.

The fact that not even one of the half dozen or so black leaders who have ascended to the power elite has said anything at all about the subject of race speaks volumes about how normalized the induced subalterity is. Sporadic declarations rejecting and acknowledging persistent racism from white men in the high leadership are contradicted by realities that confirm that the exclusion and disdain we still have to endure are the norm.

In this year that marks the hundredth anniversary of the massacre of the Independent of Color, the reinstated statue of José Miguel Gómez that is going up is an inadmissible affront to our nation's sensibilities and dignity. The construction of orthodox cathedrals (while African origin religions are denied the right to consecrate temples); official refusal to acknowledge the *Abakuá* heroes of November 27th, 1871; institutional disdain for the historical reason for and value of the

Independents of Color; persistently calling ‘Cuban’ a stagnated and retrograde Russian ballet (which is in no way connected to our most authentic cultural traditions or modernity); academic programs that lack any reflection on the contributions of black Cubans to our history and culture; humiliating and denigrating images of blacks promoted on national television; persistent police harassment and the violation of the rights of blacks and easterners; the scandalous reduction of blacks to represent only 10% of the population in official, demographic statistics; and the distancing of Cuba from the continental and global movement to rescue and reevaluate the legacy and values of African descendants, are some examples of the unchanging, racist perspective of Cuba’s governing elite.

A television course titled “Those who Ideated Cuba” that makes no mention of the Independent Party of Color, as well as of the concerns and proposals of all these thinkers who promoted identity and integration, is a full-scale representation of the arrogant, exclusionary and anti-national nature of the

criollo hegemony that took power when Spain still controlled Cuba, and has survived totalitarianism’s egalitarian rhetoric, to implant in our minds, and the nation’s spirit, a very distorted and schematic image of ourselves, and turn its back on and totally ignores the contributions and protagonism of a fundamental part of our social body—one that has always been relegated to the back, and made invisible.

We face the enormous and far-reaching challenge of deconstructing the cultural and social mentalities that sustain a fracture imposed for centuries on our nation, and concede total value to the concerns and proposals of so many thinkers who have promoted equality and anti-racism. We must do this so that the illusion of equality for which we have so long yearned, and to which we have so long contributed in the construction of a Cuba for all—a Cuba free of myths, prejudices, falsehoods, and hegemony—can firmly, intelligently and consequently become a reality. A Cuba for all must stay away from its customary chauvinism and exclusion, and become an exemplar of justice and integration.

* Birán: a place in eastern Cuba where the Castro brothers were born.