

The Independents of Color and Equal Rights

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If when the Morúa Amendment (1910) was approved, which blocked any democratic recourse, the Senate of the Republic of Cuba had instead discussed and crafted laws based on just a few of the programmatic principles of the Independent Party of Color, would the massacre of 1912 taken place?

In reality, justification for it was based solely on fear of blacks and the Haitian example. What brought about the so-called War of 1912—not a war, really, but a massacre—was visceral hate aimed at one race, and white arrogance. This despite the fact that whites were playing ‘at democracy,’ but would still never accept that blacks were free and had equal rights. Why? Because they found their skin color as sufficient pretext to consider them humans belonging to an inferior category.

There was not one single racist demand among the many expressed by the Independent Party of Color. On the contrary. Its members were equally concerned with all Cubans, love of country, the development of cordial relations amongst all citizens, the preservation of Cuban nationality, and for all those born in Cuba to be able to participate equally in public administration, education for all, justice, immigration, workers’ and civil rights, and a right to land and

employment. All these issues smacked of a deeply nationalistic and patriotic feeling. A hundred years later, they are still current and applicable to our times, because the situation of blacks in Cuba has changed very little since the early twentieth century.

Each and every one of the programmatic bases upon which the party was founded by Evaristo Estenoz is like so many other claims, not only for black citizens, but for all Cubans, especially the poorest, regardless their skin color. Nowhere in their writing does it say that one race should be above another. Instead, it says that the race that for 500 years was maligned and humiliated should be seen as equal to the other because, in the end, the fate of all Cubans will derive from one same process.

Things today are just as they were in 1912. There are some whites who deny any need to solve the race problem in Cuba because, according to them, there is none. Similarly, as before, there are people in the black population who deny they have suffered discrimination because they have had opportunities equal to those of whites, and have known how to take advantage of them to find their own place in society. Some say that just talking about racism is racist, that such talk endangers the country’s unity and, worse yet, that

the struggle for democracy in Cuba needs for blacks to shut up.

A constitution that acknowledges the equal rights of blacks and whites when, in practice, politicians of yesteryear and now—who feel threatened by a potential backlash by blacks in power—create all sorts of obstacles to block blacks access to better paid jobs and public office, is not worth the paper it is written on. These politicians will not allow blacks to be in a position to make important decisions for Cuban society.

In today's context, what the Independent Party of Color wanted was affirmative action measures. Its members sought to calibrate the scales of social justice with rules that would make it impossible for blacks to remain subordinated. In addition, they wanted to prevent this subordination—really alienation—from increasing, and for those who had fought with whites for the country's independence to be able to construct the republic of all, and for the good of all.

Given the fact blacks got a late, and not altogether well-prepared start in all of this, it is as important now as it was back then to seek balance through laws, and not allow social antagonism to squash society's most vulnerable members.

The rights of blacks as citizens should be laid out clearly, through laws. In a multiracial society that pretends there are no skin colors, what really happens is that blacks are invisibilized, and never made equal. In the interests of unity, independence and national sovereignty, non-whites should pay attention to what white hegemony decides. Besides, blacks remain outside that equation, which is why thousands of them were assassinated in 1912 in an act of genocide that few foresaw and no one could have kept from happening.

If the Liberal or Conservative parties had included in their programs topics like those that constituted the bases for the Independent Party

of Color, blacks gladly would have joined them. Yet, the Independents of Color's program was far too democratic for the taste of those who during colonial times were members of the powerful classes, all of them slave-owners, but who fought alongside blacks because the independence wars required it.

Those who were wealthy before the war, now wanted to be even wealthier. Likewise, those who before had no political power, now wanted it all to themselves. Their relationship with their former slaves, and descendents of those slaves, remained absolutely the same: a subordinated relationship modeled on a slave-master model that never embraced the notion of brotherly collaboration for the sake of constructing the nation. The rest—as they say—was naïve romanticism or ferocious opportunism.

The twenty-first century catches us embroiled in the very same struggle against the demons of hate and ambition masquerading as unity and democracy—even with congratulatory, back slapping—so that blacks keep on being well-behaved, cooperate for the benefit of just a few, and not ask too much, so as not to endanger the republic's stability.

Colonial whites became republican whites, and those of the 1959 revolution are still the very same whites. Even if they had no money prior to 1959, they feel like descendants of the earlier ones, solely because they have the same skin color. As in the past, it seems to be excessive to make requests on behalf of slave descendants—for things like equal access to well paid jobs, fairly distributed farm land, access to technical careers and higher education, and fair treatment by the police, courts and prisons.

Despite prejudices, the State should engage in the creation of real citizens' values free of dogma and slogans that promote the hate, intolerance and resentment to which all blacks, all of us, are subjected to and victimized by a hundred years after the terrible stain that was left on our



Second Race and Cubanness Forum. Arrest of Guillermo O. Lizama in area of CIR headquarters. (November, 2011)