

Beating about the Bush or Beating a Drum

José Hugo Fernández
Writer and journalist
Havana, Cuba

A few months ago, when the “Cuba y los pueblos afrodescendientes en América” [Cuba and African Descendant People in America] seminar was held in Havana, Rolando García, a representative from the Fondo de Población de Naciones Unidas [United Nations Population Fund] (UNFPA), declared that Cuba leads Latin America regarding the equality of opportunities for its citizens. In saying this, it is not at all surprising that he made not even the smallest of exception of the situation of Cuba’s slave descendants, whose critical poverty and multivarious disadvantages—as the poorest population group—have been acknowledged by at least a few government spokespersons. What *is* strange is that García made this declaration in Havana, as he had previously had the opportunity to meet and talk to State institutional scholars and functionaries who now seem committed to studying and revealing details about this situation.

Given their attitude when they heard the aforementioned declarations by the UNFPA representative (silence does speak volumes), one would have to conclude that both those scholars of the problem and the State institu-

tions that have recently committedly focused on it do not consider erroneous or inconvenient for García to tread on truly thin ice. Once again, the peaceful opposition’s organizations were the ones to ‘cross the t’s and dot the i’s’ via public proclamations such as the one signed by Juan Antonio Madrazo, National Coordinator of the (unlawful) *Citizens’ Committee for Racial Integration*, and Eleanor Calvo, Director of the *Citizens’ Observatory Against Discrimination*. They both consider Rolando García’s declaration to be unacceptable, because it is mockingly vulgar to Cuban citizens.

Why is it that anti-racist scholars and functionaries who are currently working from within the government’s structures cannot rigorously and scientifically focus on the issue of African descendants in Cuba without letting politics get in the way. Why is it they’d rather listen to justifications and not weighty clarifications, even when they are fully able to see the problem? How is it possible to explain their conservative silence when facing those who insist on keeping alive the myth of a radically emancipated Cuba, one where all its citizens have equal access to opportunities

to progress—despite all the evidence to the contrary?

It ends up being much easier to understand that clique of foreign progressives who are anchored in the still waters of ideological fundamentalism. They refuse to accept any fact, no matter how well documented, that doesn't come from the Cuban government's arsenal. Just one example of this (an extreme but illustrative one of this sort), is that even after Nikita Khrushchev denounced the Stalinist Gulags at the Twenty-Second Communist Party Congress, their existence continued being denied.

The position of this new wave of scholars and other revealers of racism against blacks in Cuba is different. After hearing what they have to say, or reading their books and papers, one cannot doubt their special sensitivity to the matter, or their resolute commitment. In most cases, it comes from their own, deeply painful and personal experiences. Neither is there any reason to doubt their professional qualifications and analytical abilities. After all, we have had to wait numerous decades for new publications devoted to the race problem written, generally, from a much more realist and critical perspective, and not an apologetic one. So, it would be absurd not to celebrate the good news and not appreciate those publications, even if we do not accept their methodology or all the observations and statements they contain.

Yet, given the seriousness of today's circumstances (which these books sometimes confirm), one has no choice but to believe that a large portion of those scholars of the black Cuban drama are caught between a rock and a hard place—not only because it is so difficult to take aim at the government, but also because of the way these publications could very likely reveal the authors' ideological convic-

tions. After all, they also must have put their talents to work for the very same government, and not only to earn a salary. How is it possible to emerge unscathed from the bind of having to consider political passion over acknowledging historical realities whose concession would be a political inconvenience? At this time, it might be more advisable to consider their exploratory questions, and not harshly judge them. These might be more helpful to our understanding of these pro-government, Cuban anti-racists.

Unasked questions

It is impossible to ignore the trauma and innumerable losses the collapse of the Soviet Union and the entire socialist bloc in Eastern Europe perpetrated on Cuba and its peculiar socialism. Nor is it possible to ignore that this trauma and loss were also shaped by how poorly the Cuban government used the advantages it enjoyed for decades under the tutelage and economic subvention of that bloc for the purpose of development. Rivers of ink have been spilled on this topic. Worse yet, this is a historical reality that the Cuban people have lived with daily for more than ten years. It forced them to awaken from the limbo of false security in which they had slept, only to suddenly face the real and difficult structural crisis of a system constructed like a sandcastle.

There isn't one single scholar who does not focus on the debacle of the early 1990s, in order to be able to deal with the current black Cuban problem. This is to be expected, of course, because no other event in over a half a century of revolutionary government has been more responsible for this examination of the problem. Yet, not all scholars seem willing to come to the same conclusion. This may be where the outcomes of pro-government

scholars and those who work at the margins most differ. Unfortunately, this also causes them to distance themselves from each other.

The most revealing evidence of the revolutionary government's disinterest and political blindness in dealing with the historic problems of black Cubans (in practice, not rhetorically) can be found precisely in the so-called *Special Period*, a direct result of the dismemberment of socialist Eastern Europe. If the problems of black Cubans (poverty, social and economic marginalization, a lack of opportunities, centuries of being discriminatorily held back, etc.) had, in practice, received the proper attention, through concrete actions stemming from the design and systematic application of programs that left no stone unturned and allowed for no empty egalitarian words—even after more than thirty years of the government having all the power and resources—the coming of the *Special Period* might have been different, but it still would have been serious and compromising. That is was, for the rest of society, but this iteration of the *Special Period* would not have been as scandalously tragic for black people. Neither would it have been so different to deal with, in the medium term. This is incredibly obvious: it shouldn't have to be explained. Strangely, though, those anti-racists working from within governmental structures—all of them, without exception—are pointing to nothing other than the *Special Period* as the principal and more responsible cause of the precarious situation of Cuba's African descendants. According to them, the historical inequality inherited by blacks reached a disproportionate climax during that period. Avoiding a discussion of the three decades prior to the *Special Period* allows these scholars to evade, or avoid discussing any revolutionary factors

that might have contributed to this. Thus, we are left to assume that very little was done during that time to diminish or decrease that inherited inequality.

Is it possible that a historical truth such as this—essential for understanding the current situation of black Cubans and for finding possible solutions—does not deserve to be scrutinized with the greatest and clearest objectivity? Doesn't confusing the effect and cause contradict even the very principles of historical and dialectical materialism employed by these pro-government, anti-racist scholars in their research?

To take an obvious example, one of the nearly irremediable difficulties these scholars deal with is an almost total lack of sources (books, statistics, anthropological studies, etc.) that would allow them to study the problem during the revolutionary government's first four decades in power. Naturally, this situation is not due in any way to the fact there weren't sufficient professionals available to study them. Might it be due to practical limitations in the publishing field? No one would say so, particularly since even President Fidel Castro declared "Mil millones de libros en 43 años es una cifra que impresiona" [A billion books in 43 years is an impressive figure] at the inauguration of the Alejo Carpentier publishing house¹. This is impressive, but isn't it equally impressive that one can count on one hand (and that number of fingers may be too many) the number of books devoted to the diligent, critical, and truly vindicating study of those historical inequalities inherited by black Cubans for centuries?

Fortunately (although fortune is never lavish with the poor), the desire of so many institutional scholars and some specialized institutions to remedy this shameful lacuna is appreciated. It is now not so unusual to find

one or another book about the current situation of black Cubans in bookstores. The same is true of books that rescue historical events concerning blacks that from some, inexplicable reason, official historiography forgot or ignored, or for decades dealt with very summarily. There are also now specialized journals that frequently deal with these subjects, and events where specialists and other knowledgeable (pro-government) people discuss or, more accurately, come to an agreement about the complexity of the racial problems that affect blacks. Unfortunately, no Cuban anti-racists from the peaceful opposition are invited to these events, even if they are genuine, honest and able. It is also too bad that these exchanges take place only in the intellectual arena, where the majority of people cannot participate or even be adequately informed about what's going on.

Notwithstanding, we are in the midst of an interesting, useful and substantially movement concerning studies and specialized exchanges that put the drama of black Cubans at their core. If this continues, in ten years it may not be necessary to limit ourselves to the usefulness of oral testimony, or any other kind of empirical source due to a lack of legitimate, scientific documentation. The only

insufficiency still awaiting a resolution is a lack of seriousness or deepening, a scourge for which prejudice and ideological commitment are responsible, as well as a lack of an impartial conceptual plurality in studies that are carried out. By nature, governments and politicians need to sweeten their actions and ideas. Social researchers, on the other hand, only try to get at the precise truth, because their profession obliges them to do so.

In Cuban slang, "dar violín" means to 'beat about the bush, to adorn one's rhetoric in a way that the weight of the truth one speaks seems less heavy, or to keep the truth's resonance from sounding so harsh, like the beating of a drum at a party. Apropos this, we might end with one last question that has not been asked. Which would be the clearest way for those scholars and anti-racists to face their responsibility regarding the black Cuban drama today? *Dando violín* [beating around the bush] or beating a drum?

Note:

1- *Granma Internacional* (27 April, 2002).