

Current Details, Dangers and Challenges in the Race Debate in Cuba

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A few, recently published studies of the race problem in Cuba have taken a phrase written by José Martí totally out of context:

“There is no fear of a race war in Cuba. Men are more than white, more than mulatto, more than black. Cubans are more than white, more than mulatto, more than black.”

In both cases, the Apostle of yesteryear and scholars of today have conveniently lost sight of the fact that the war of supremacist hegemony began a long time ago, when even the most eminent visionaries of *criollo* supremacy realized that Africans, and their descendants in Cuba, were not a territorially, socially or culturally boxed in minority. They realized we black Cubans were active participants in every economic, cultural, social and political process, and in systematized patterns of behavior and thinking—to the point that the vast majority of us see ourselves exactly as that colonial mentality has imagined us. This explains why we hate ourselves and are trying to cease being what we are, instead of

decolonizing our minds and spirits, and being proud of our struggles and contributions to the country’s history and culture.

That discriminatory and colonizing design even turned into cultural paradigms the denigration and demonization of everything we are, as happens in *bufo* theater and the well known novel *Cecilia Valdés* (1882). This denigrating pattern begins with language itself. According to our traditional way of referring to things, my bag has more personality than I do: it is a black bag; I am a black. That naturally accepted colonial pattern turned an adjective into a noun, and began to differentiate black Cubans using zoological terms. References to animals are made according to their color and characteristics, as with horses, for example: the bay, the grey, the pinto, the paint, the black. The same is true of the way in which other discriminated people are referred to: fatty, squinty, gimp, sissy and blackie.

It is so bad to be black that it is much better to be mulatto, another colonial expression whose origin stems from being compared to an infertile beast (the mule) the product of two species, yet this term has taken on a posi-

tive connotation, because it indicates one is ceasing being what one shouldn't be (black), according to that colonial mentality, and after more than a century after abolition.

A black British friend of mine who was visiting Cuba expressed shock and dismay at how much people called themselves mulattoes. He would say 'I am not an animal, I am a black man; black because of my obvious physical and genetic characteristics, but a man, because my humanness comes first, and is essential to that physical condition.'

We Cubans need to internalize this concept so we can begin seeing ourselves differently, and then begin treating ourselves differently, too. Since black Cubans are not a territorially, culturally and socially boxed in minority without participation; ever since we have lived and breathed the illusion and fiction of equality since the earliest days of the first republic, the supremacists—whose ideology transcends historical eras, ideologies and rhetoric—do not see themselves as such, do not define themselves as racists, and ensconce themselves in a series of limited arguments, to reaffirm those patterns.

The very first thing is national unity. Dealing profoundly with the race problem is taken as dangerous, as possibly fracturing an always threatened national unity that persists in the elite's rhetoric. This rhetoric confuses hegemonic coexistence with unity, and deprives black Cubans of the access and participation they deserve. Were they to have these, this would be the truest expression of this unity. Cuba would be a place where everyone in Cuban society could enjoy equal rights and opportunities, and have access to the same spaces,—somewhere beyond all the speeches, and free of the customary exclusions.

Limited unity was the pretext used to show that the race problem was solved during

the revolution's earliest days. It also served to ignore calls and proposals made from nationalist and leftist positions that promoted an objective and strategic treatment of the topic, so the historical shortcomings and disadvantages accumulated over so long could begin being erased.

An oft repeated point is that we should first achieve democracy, and then tackle the race problem. Yet, there would always be something more important to deal with, thus the issue would always be of secondary importance, and this enormously important problem so crucial to our coexistence would forever be left on the waiting list.

The second thing is the persistent denial of the black Cuban condition. Many, including academics, insist upon challenging even the individual right to consider one's self a black Cuban. Hearing the oft repeated phrase "We are all Cubans" brings to mind a popular tale about someone who gets in the midst of a violent argument between blacks and whites who want to get on a bus. The self-appointed referee passionately shouts: 'Quiet! That's enough arguing. There are no longer any blacks or whites. We are now all green and organized. The light green folks can get on first; the dark green folks can wait!'

This denial of black Cubanness is very easy to understand; it is much easier to disdain, dominate and manipulate: a social group devoid of origins, lineage, or tradition. An awareness of one's origins and traditions is essential to self-esteem, pride and identity. This is bad news for supremacist interests. No one has thought to tell folks in the U.S. 'you are not Anglo-Saxons; you are just Americans.' In Cuba, after a few generations, the descendants of Spaniards can face with total assurance a group of their compatriots at the Spanish consulate to acquire the nationality of their

ancestors. Yet, even academe wants to prohibit us from being what we really are.

The fact is that this undeclared war is visible in our mentality, culture and images. Once in a while, this comes to a head, even to the point of bloody violence: in 1812, with the Aponte Conspiracy; in 1844, with the crushing repression launched on account of the alleged Escalera Conspiracy, which physically and materially eliminated that caste of educated blacks and *mestizos* leaders who represented a threat to *criollo* supremacy.

That fear of blacks that has existed since the early nineteenth century, and exists even today, is not really a fear of black violence, but rather fear of that talent, those abilities and actions that were so often witnessed in salons, on the streets, on stage, in the arena, and on the battlefield.

Then came 1912, with its treacherous and bloody paroxysm. It is now 2012, and the demands of the Independent Party of Color (PIC) are still totally valid; their debate is just as chilling and complex now as before. This debate, and its concerns, move in numerous dimensions and at several levels.

- The pain of inequality and disadvantage permeate our most basic society; rage is on the increase; with every systematic and structural turn veiled by revolutionary euphemism our society is becoming increasingly polarized. Most of the people who live in marginal, ghetto neighborhoods; the indigent homeless; the unemployed; imprisoned convicts; the trash pickers—the pariahs and hopeless—in essence, are black Cubans. Yet, we still don't have sufficient points of reference to turn that rage and pain into conscious civic action.
- Disquiet and rage are also increasing among the ranks of governmental intel-

lectuals and professionals. Yet, despite the fact they indeed do have access to all the details, and the ability to evaluate them, it is hard for them to get at the bottom of this problem because of the pressures and fears to which they are subjected—which are powerful.

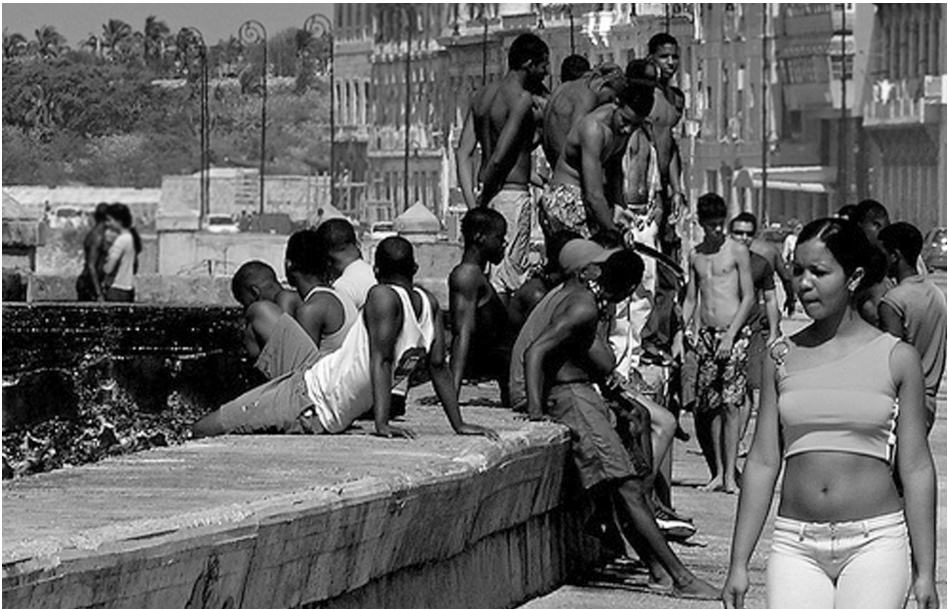
- Those in power are like a double-edged sword, their behavior, contradictory, at best. They have had to acknowledge the persistence of racism and its consequences. Those on high have called it an embarrassment, but don't acknowledge or assume their historical and political responsibility for the tragedy. On the one hand, they sow panic among intellectuals and important leaders, so they don't cross the line that keeps them from essentially questioning the crystal clear, structural causes of the tragedy. On the other, they reaffirm and reinforce this racist pattern's basic precepts. They are not capable of dealing with the problem in its two decisive dimensions: the educational system and mass media. Fundamental and defining change will come to those patterns and references when the debate—and historical truth, above all—occupy their rightful place on educational programming, television, film and literature. The historical truth about the accomplishments achieved by black Cubans throughout the centuries must be fairly acknowledged and communicated.
- Despite repeated demands, the authorities have not dared make public the debate about race. The only place this debate takes place is in controlled spaces, but it should be opened up to people on the outside, on the streets and in communities.

- Cuba has not joined a global movement to reevaluate the heritage, and promote the values and rights, of African descendants. The Cuban government's participation in activities generated by the United Nations' International Year for African Descendants was late, poor and very limited.

The government was true to its traditional pattern of behavior. The high leadership in Havana accused the organizers of the First World Congress for African Descendants (in La Ceiba, Honduras, in August 2011) of being imperialist agents without considering the solidarity and collaboration there had been with Cuban authorities in the past. They were incapable of understanding the pluralistic sense essence, and spirit of civic independence that has animated this global movement. In June 2011, Cuba, and all the other governments of the so-called Bolivarian Alliance of the Americas (ALBA), organized a

program—including large events in Washington, Havana, and Caracas—to bring greater attention and constructive actions to the race problem. Of course, these were always from a hegemonic and manipulative perspective.

Time has had the last word. The governments of ALBA—essentially Cuba, Venezuela, Nicaragua, Ecuador and Bolivia—really have nothing to show for themselves in their dealings with the issue of advantages, minorities and majorities. They have done absolutely nothing of what they promised. In contrast, the final declaration at La Ceiba was an exemplary, clear condemnation of the colonial vestiges that continue to validate inequality and injustice. Likewise, the solid political program is beginning to bear fruit, with the United Nations' declaration that instituted the Decade for African Descendants. The Cuban, civil, anti-racist movement has developed a rich program of intellectual, civic and cultural activities that have increased its prestige



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and ability to bring people together, despite the fact it is subjected to brutal repression, and was permitted to have its own representatives participate in the congress at La Ceiba, due to government interference.

Beyond the promises that have gone unfulfilled, the timid references to the race problem made at the National Assembly's sessions, and at the governing party's deceptive National Conference, the facts confirm the persistence of that retrograde and discriminatory mentality. It transcends speeches and verbal commitments.

Statistics from the official Population and Housing Census (2002) are astonishing: 10.1% blacks, 24.9 *mestizos* and 64% whites. According to these figures, a number of municipalities and even provinces with a considerable proportion of black Cubans don't even exist. These absurd evaluation methods and figures create the Cuba those who govern want to see.

Studies and debates about the hundredth anniversary of the massacre of the PIC have reconfirmed the manipulating omissions and distortions that misrepresent our history. It has also been nearly two centuries since the first black, popular, anti-colonial, anti-slavery, and revolutionary movement in Cuba took place and, despite their implication and importance, this epic history is unknown to most ordinary Cubans.

There is only one possible conclusion: they don't want black heroes. It is easier to manipulate, nullify, and objectify a people, a social group with no origins, no tradition and no heroes. That is the intention behind this so oft repeated phrase: "The revolution has done more for blacks than anyone else." Their desperation to reaffirm their exclusionary hegemony prohibits them from seeing this phrase's colonial connotations.

If fact, the slavocracy "did things for blacks," on occasion, but always seeing them as objects of supremacist manipulation. This is the prevailing mentality. Nothing more needs to be said about it, because reality is capriciously illustrative. It reveals all the disadvantage, deferment and pain we have accumulated over these fifty years. They are glaringly obvious. The way in which history repeats itself today is tragic. Many of the problems and demands that brought about the birth of the PIC and its struggle are still current. Furthermore, even the scene, characters and attitudes are very similar.

Beyond their inclusive rhetoric, those in power use sovereignty and unity to manipulate and divide. Intellectuals who are supposedly committed to the cause serve the system and its particular interests; independent activists openly and clearly face the problem and its serious social and political implications; and the great mass, the people, suffer powerlessly and silently, and need a light to illuminate the future. This is precisely the danger and challenge for this new year, 2012.

There is danger in the foreseeable alliance of *criollo* interests ready to unite—despite historical, ideological differences—to fortify that colonial mentality with new and complicated conditions. It is a mentality that subalternizes, instrumentalizes and divides in order to confirm the power and hegemony of those who have always had it.

The challenge is being able to bolster pride, self-esteem and identity as the only road to rising up from the yoke of our own spirit, so we can once again begin to build the shared home free of exclusion and supremacy that our ancestors believed they had won for us on the battlefield of redemption, long ago.