

# Cuba: Indigency and Race

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In Cuba, before 1959, when everyday language was not so permeated by euphemisms, people who lived on the streets day and night, scraping around anywhere they could to find food, clothes, shoes and shelter for themselves and their families, were called indigents, beggars, homeless people, or bums. It was a time of transparent definitions when no one saw indigency as a business. It was clearly the result of social differentiation, and the fact there were no State policies for dealing with these social outcasts, and little social sensitivity for those who were unfortunate enough to lack a secure place in life. Never mind that most of them were black.

At night, those indigents slept wherever they could, but there were also beggars who spent their time begging alms for them and their families. They, too, were classified as indigents.

It seems that 1959 would mean a change. The new government impacted society greatly. Hunger, poverty, and unemployment were abolished in Cuba, and social equality was proclaimed, so that each and every citizen would have the same rights and responsibilities. Never mind that the social reality of indigency became history.

The government's social initiatives proceeded in the right direction. The idea of the old folks' home was replaced by the *Hogar de Ancianos* [Home for the Elderly]. As the bourgeois social circles began to disappear workers' social circles and other institutions were created. Naturally, though, there were still indigents in Cuba in the 1960s, but the government made sure to use the mass media to transmit the idea that this was just a vestige of the past that the Revolution would slowly eliminate.

By the 1970s, the poverty regenerated by indigency increased, even though it was invisible within the revolution's myth, and its struggle with the past. The assistance the Cuban government began to receive from the now former Soviet Union at the beginning of the 1980s guaranteed certain, important improvements, that together with health policies, helped increase life expectancy and aging in the population. There was still indigency, but less of it. The fact it was seen as something from the past is obvious in the fact that there was no new name for it.

Social differences became much more obvious in the 1990s. The collapse of those who subsidized Cuba heightened a crisis that was already developing by the end of the eighties. Even if the government managed to distort the crisis by calling it the Special Period in Peacetime, it also hid and invisibilized indigency, which was one of the first conditions to emerge during that decade. It was quite common at that time to see people picking up any refuse they could, to try to find food, sell it, or replenish something in their homes. The public presence of many black people, mostly women, among the indigent was some of the best evidence of racial inequality.

The crisis's impact was overwhelming. Underpaid people were literally hungry. Let's just say that it was the beginning of an "ethnic" hunger that still exists now, that invades mostly the marginal neighborhoods where mostly black people, old people, and single women live.

Class differences became sharper, and became ensconced and permanent in society, and indigency again entrenched itself. Those who lacked direct access to the State's resources began



to swarm around the legal or illegal sources that produced resources outside of work.

Then poverty became degraded. That is what indigency is, a structural degradation of poverty that quickly descends into destitution, surpasses it, and situates individuals in a condition of absolute marginalization in society.

Indigency began to invade the areas surrounding the new middle and higher classes emerging in larger cities, characterizing itself as an urban phenomenon that gave a new tone to the country's social and racial landscape. Blackness was no longer an adjective describing cultural prejudice; it began to identify a new identity on the social scale that went from the indigent, poor and destitute, to the middle class, to the rich and the super rich, all of society's stratifications, a scale on which skin grew lighter as one ascended it.

A new term for indigents emerged at this time: *buzos* [divers]. It revealed an awareness of a phenomenon from the past that had rigorously reemerged in society. It is curious that the term derived from the cans and barrels situated in neighborhoods to collect the trash that homes discarded on a daily basis, to be taken to municipal dumps. *Buzos* are midway between the trash

and the dump because they are hungry, above all. They are also called *leones* and *tanqueros* [lions and tankers]. They dig through what opulence excretes to be able to survive at society's margins. *Buzos* are marginal people who abandon their natural habitat to invade city centers where this trash is to be made, and then are painfully criticized by the new and crude social divisions that fracture Cuban society.

Blacks and old people constitute two groups of marginalized people that are forced to be shameless, due to an extreme need to break with hygiene in the city. They are two socially rejected groups, but most of them are black.

That being said, these *buzos* do not just consume trash. They also produce and connect to the new service economy. In two ways, they are actually quite productive people: they help with social hygiene because they pick up the trash of an uncivilized urban culture that tosses it onto any street or corner, and they expedite the recycling of raw materials within a new concept of industrial ecology.

Just as in the eighteenth century, blacks and old people do the required work that *criollos* from wealthy families consider lowly and denigrating. They create real refuse markets that allow them to survive with greater dignity in a very tough labor market that tossed them at the beginning of the 1990s. Many of these *buzos* are now between 50 and 80 years of age: those who were the most active in the 1990s. They are so productive that the State has decided to do two equally cynical things: it is going to burden this ecological work with taxes, instead of making it easier, on the one hand; and on the other, it fines it, at its own convenience, when it wants to communicate a message about hygiene, health and cleanliness. In other words, indigency has become a market value and crime, all at once.

It seems that Cuba's black men and women cannot live in peace. Neither can they live as social criminals whose only capacity is to reproduce this criminality or social harm.