

# Racial Hatred: An Inescapable Legacy?

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A comparative analysis of the integration of blacks in slave societies in the Americas reveals unique details about the real situation of these involuntary travelers. If we compare their social incorporation in countries as different in size and culture as the United States, Brazil and Cuba, we would see that by the mid-nineteenth century, there was already a marked difference in these three examples. The Antillean colony of Cuba displayed a substantial difference. By 1850, the population of freed slaves who had their own positions and even businesses among black Cubans was much greater in proportion to the total number of blacks and *mestizos* than was the case of their counterparts in the other two countries I have taken as examples.<sup>1</sup>

This tendency towards liberation, while confused, was no doubt integrationist in nature, and was an active part of the fledgling nation's social conscience. In it, blacks with their own businesses or positions were becoming increasingly important. Yet, the country's slow conformation also nourished the abominable weight of the degradation of slavery. Its imprint scarred not only the captives, but also the society that supported it, and this scar ran really deep.

When the first War for Independence began in 1868, the conformation and establishment of equality for all citizens immediately encountered dismal obstacles among

the untrained independence forces. There are historical testimonies that make quite clear that the white Mambi soldiers and their freed black counterparts had no problems amongst themselves as social beings who were fighting for freedom. They saw each other as equals. Yet, both groups still treated slaves recently manumitted by their pro-independence owners as though they were slaves; they did not trust them, and stuck them with doing manual labor, far from the weapons.

Despite the fact these limitations were slowly obviated by armed conflict's urgent reality, they certainly still revealed a trend that was bowing to circumstances that would soon emerge in a society open to progress. This showed, in a very specific way, that racism and disdain had more to do with a cultural prejudice rooted in customs than with skin color or physical characteristics.

The search for the social acknowledgment that blacks demanded at the end of the second War for independence, in 1898, was justified. They wanted the same conditions as all other members of society. Their participation in the struggle for independence embodied full commitment and sacrifice on their part, even if more of them fought in 1868 than in 1895, as many point out. In either case, their numbers were proportionate to the rest of those who fought against colonial power. Accustomed, as we are, to the intoxicating fumes of impas-

sioned nationalism, and the poor research and writing of tendentious historians, it is no longer necessary to ignore the undeniable fact—more a rule, than an exception—that during our national wars many more people, in their majority even blacks, abstained from fighting, or worse yet, bore arms against Cuba's independence—as happened with the *Batallón de Pardos y Morenos* in Havana.

It is easy to see now—in retrospect—how these harmful battle practices encouraged armed conflicts, rebellions, regional *caudillos*, tough guys, and military uprisings in Cuba. These were attempts to quickly achieve—through primitive leaps forward—modern political and social goals in a place that would be completely destroyed by an all-encompassing war. These methods would leave Cuba far removed from the republican fervor that had a nearly one hundred year, precarious existence on the American continent by then. This left the scar of uncivilization on Cuba, yet did not make them any less popular in Cuban society.

The country's legal intentions and code were not able to erase by fiat the administrative scourge and prejudices of a recently destroyed colonial culture—despite any good intentions. The tempo was imposed by human and historical interests, and the inescapable cultural inertia of a nationality that was beginning to take shape without colonial tutelage. In their impatience, the most active black leaders, whose immediate expectations were frustrated, were tempted by violence as an instrument of change, a lesson they had learned in their struggle against colonial Spain. The first sign of this terrible, inherited violence came about in the fleeting and bloody War of the Independents of Color in the new Republic's early years. It brought about the atrocious massacre of black Cubans, about 1,000 of whom died in illegal executions and murders.

Notwithstanding, the effects of needing to unite forcefully, according to their race, and create a geographic space for themselves independent of the rest of the nation, ended up being terrible for the integration of blacks as new Cuban citizens. The convulsion this bloody episode triggered in the country rekindled the idea of violence as a national revolutionary method. In addition, the most prejudiced and negative notions about black people increasingly gained space in the national imaginary. Despite the fact that they had nothing directly to do with this episode, this brought about negative results for the majority of blacks in Cuba. Consequently, the contributions of black Cubans to the nation's independence were ignored, which then kindled prejudices and mistrust concerning blacks in the very society in which they had to live, which excluded and disdained them.

For more than half a century, the republic's consolidation moved hesitantly, and was plagued by outbursts of the usual violence, corruption and constitutional violations. Yet, concomitantly, neither was there a gradual establishment of law and order, a state of law, or democratic liberties. At first, black Cubans took good advantage of this space, and early on managed to achieve weak but growing representation in the country's legal bodies and civil society. The derision of discrimination, which affected both whites and blacks—with its kernel of mistrust and hate—was softened by society's integrating branches, tendencies based on democratic ideas. Thus, cultural thinking began to be transformed.

With the coming of the strained period that began in 1959, by decree, the long and extended march towards the integration into society of black Cubans as citizens was dragged out by the vortex of radical changes the country underwent. Under the law, black

Cubans saw themselves equal to the majority of the white Cuban population regarding their rights and opportunities as a result of impulsive and popular actions taken in favor of forcing society's leveling.

Yet, neither group could rid itself of its cultural tradition and heritage by fiat or command, not even the prejudices and ideological thinking about the other race. What this revealed was much more about remorse than the revolution's forced egalitarianism.

Despite having subsidized access to jobs, professions and leadership positions whose costs were defrayed by the State, and an increasingly and absolutely statist scene, racial equality only came about by official means. In fact, everyone—blacks and whites—was in the midst of undergoing a transformation from active or latent citizens, into serfs with no rights in a totalitarian state. In this scenario, launched into a “bright future” during a ever more closed, contemporary situation plagued by myriad problems, the underlying and persistent social prejudices jeopardized the slow and tortured, yet sure and steady integration of blacks and whites that tentatively began with the Republic that was born in 1902.

A democratic state of law, so basic a condition for the racial and cultural traditions of any society, was excluded from Cuban society. Lamentably, the experience of more than fifty years of this forced scenario has shown that differences, disdain, and mistrust between both racial groups has increased to levels far beyond those in existence prior to 1959. This lamentable situation is even worse because neither of the two racial groups enjoys citizens' rights, because these are subjugated under a constant state of service to the all powerful State, the supposed benefactor.

The nation we will have in the future, when we are free of the military dictatorship that subjugates us, will have to take up the challenge that was not fully met, perhaps with incredible and eruptive force. The possibilities are latent, and so are the foundations for the peace and understanding that could function equally and freely to erase the differences that constitute the better part of the onerous Castroist legacy. All Cubans should put our efforts into this positive energy and civilizing goal.

**Note:**

1-The 1860 census of the southern United States, where most of the black population lived. Figures showed a black slave population of 2,953,000, in contrast to 262,000 freed blacks, or the equivalent of about 6% of the slave population. (Source). Johnson, Paul. *Los Estados Unidos, la Historia*. On the other hand, the 1861 census in Cuba showed there to be 377,203 slaves (62.09% of the total population of blacks) and 225,843 freed blacks and mestizos (37.4% of the total number of black inhabitants). (Source). Bustamante, Luis J. *Enciclopedia Popular Cubana II*: 87. More than 4.6 million African slaves ended up living in Brazil, 35% of the total number of slaves forcibly from the African continent, approximately 13 million. The conditions for manumission imposed by the Portuguese crown and later upheld by the Empire of Pedro I were the most extraordinarily difficult and hard of the entire continent, which explains why only about 2% earned the negotiated freedom.