

The Color of the Crime

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It is commonplace to see officers of the National Revolutionary Police (PNR) detaining young, black passersby on the streets of Havana—everyday. They request their IDs, take note of their clothes and belongings right on the street, and when they consider it timely, put them in their police cars, vehicles in which those who are detained must wait while they are filled up before being taken to the police station.

Despite its vulgarity, and that of the methods employed, this scene is now a regular occurrence, and it is noticed by people of any race, Cuba or foreign. The fact is that in order to understand so obvious a manifestation of racism one must ignore everything learned in school, even in kindergarten, where the youngest of my daughters was taught that there are no whites or blacks, that in reality there are some kids who are pink, and other who are brown. This explanation has little value when years later the pink ones go on to university and the brown ones darken the prisons; and by the time they are all adults, the highest and best paid positions belong almost exclusively to pink people, while brown people are the ones filling potholes, pulling carts, and picking up the trash.

The majority of the pink people live in residential zones, while it is mostly brown

people who inhabit the shantytowns, tenement yards and marginal neighborhoods. The one place these differences are seen less may be in rural areas, in eastern Cuba, where children do not notice what color their playmates are, and poverty is so extremely common and pervasive that there is an equal lack of opportunities.

This is why young people from Santiago and Guantanamo opt for joining the PNR. Fleeing poverty, they come to the capital of all Cubans to live in barracks till a woman three times their age takes them in.

Yet, these young men, who in their neighborhoods and rural areas of origin did not see colors among their neighbors and friends, are psychologically and physically trained, and taught how to use *tonfas* (a Japanese version of billy clubs), handcuffs, pistols and their boots, once they are recruited. In addition, they are inculcated with the notion that most criminals are black. To be safe, it is better to detain, identify, search and mistreat as many blacks as cross their paths because if they are not on their way back from committing a crime, they'll almost surely commit one anyway.

If this is all part of a plan hatched by the police academy's teachers—communist party militants, all of them—part of their

curriculum to teach their pupils the supposed, innate tendency of dark-skinned citizens to commit crimes, this is not an isolated opinion. In fact, it is the official opinion of the governing party, the leadership at the Ministry of the Interior, and as a result, the country's highest leadership, to which nothing is unknown.

Clearly, no leader who has been corrupted by complete access to the millions of pesos resulting from the citizenry's sweat and sacrifice is going to snatch a camera from a tourist on Obispo street, or a gold chain from an old lady in the Cerro; neither is he going to sell his body for a few dollars, or serve as a private tour guide for even fewer dollars. The leader waits patiently for his combined work and pleasure trip abroad, the shopping cart full of the week's groceries, and other benefits not considered gratuities.

This can be attributed to one factor: opportunities. If young blacks from Centro Habana were encouraged to continue their studies till they got a degree that would allow them to escape poverty by virtue of their own hard work, they wouldn't steal bicycles. If corrupt, white leaders did not enjoy total impunity in their actions, they wouldn't be criminals either. The established system makes all of them, from either group, take part in demoralizing Cuban society, each according to his level. Of course, there are always some animals who are more equal than others, as the supreme law in Orwell's *Animal Farm* states.

Thus, the problem consists of young black men needing sufficient opportunities guaranteed by law. For their part, the leaders need to practice the transparency the responsibility the roles they have to play—not enjoy—demand. They are, after all, humble servants who must account for what is done, and not just voraciously usurp public funds.

It is not with racist ideas that crime will be eradicated. All they accomplish is the incorporation of one more deforming element into the citizenry's consciousness, and a deepening loss of values that has hurt the civic legacy of all Cubans. To consider skin color when measuring potential criminality, that is, to criminalize dark skin, is comparable to the genocidal persecution to which Jews were subjected in Hitler's Germany; there is no difference.

In the first paragraph of Article 42 of the Constitution of the Republic of Cuba states: *Discrimination because of race, skin color, sex, national origin, religious beliefs and any other form of discrimination harmful to human dignity is forbidden and will be punished by law.*

Article 295 of the Penal Code also states that: "1. *Anyone who discriminates against another person or promotes or incites discrimination, be it a display of or desire to offered their sex, race, color or national origin, or the exercise or enjoyment of the equality established in the Constitution, will be deprived of his freedom for six month to two years, or fined from two hundred to five hundred [pesos], or both.*

2. *Anyone who propagates ideas based on racial superiority or racial hatred, or commits acts of violence, or incites other to commit them against any race or group of persons of a different skin color or ethnic origin will be similarly punished."*

If detaining black citizens, searching them and making them identify themselves on the street, in full public view, is not a crime, then where will we end up with all this? If teaching and encouraging officers responsible for maintaining order to arbitrarily detain citizens according to their skin color is not racism, then what is? The jails and cells of Cuba are jammed with people who were once called "new men," especially darker ones.