

The Dilemma of Anti-Racist Activism in Cuba

José Hugo Fernández
Writer and journalist
Havana, Cuba

Centuries since black Cubans have been facing economic poverty and a lack of social progress, and at a set moment having had the best conditions of all our history to radically address this, the Cuban regime seems set on keeping up one of its old aberrations: monopolizing anti-racist rhetoric. If there is anything at all its do-nothing policy, and the retrograde denial of a dialectic that typifies this government, reveals is precisely its insistence on applying to the debate a dictatorial maxim imposed by Fidel Castro in his *Palabras a los intelectuales* (1961): “Within the Revolution, everything; against the Revolution, nothing.” The situation is worsening; that was 52 years ago and everyone knows that no revolution lasts so long. At least no leader has remained in power so long without turning the revolution’s pristine impulses into reactionary ones.

Everything that is said or done regarding anti-racism in Cuba must first be blessed by official rhetoric, no matter how legitimate its roots or well intentioned its objectives. It is enough for them to somehow, or in some expression, contradict what the government wants to hear, for them to be deemed revisionist or even counterrevolutionary, or complicit

or mercenary at the service of a foreign enemy. This is an obstacle we have been dealing with since the early days of the revolution, politically and socio-economically, and has greatly influenced the worsening crisis we endure today, generally. It is particularly affecting Afro-descendants. Worse yet, liberal, government reformers are currently engaged in a lot of nonsense, which not only makes difficult any consensual search for light at the end of tunnel, but is also boycotting anti-racist debate by creating discord and disunion among its participants.

Although their aspirations are very similar, Cubans sympathizers, students and activists are being pushed towards irreconcilable (and sometimes hostile) rivalry based much more on their foci than feelings. It is a painful situation that should be rejected by all, regardless of their individual politics, due to its perturbing and openly harmful impact on the anti-racist cause’s interests. In the end, what is at the core of all this is not political, although racism has always reacted to political practices. Today, in our case, the issue at hand is more about power than anything else.

Mind you, I am not talking about common power but rather a totalitarian system

that has governed continuously for more than half a century. Its structure has not changed; it has governed free of any decisive opposition or legal counterparts in a climate of internal peace and concord. It has enjoyed, in sum, absolute dominion over all the country's economic reserves and socio-cultural potential. It is an apodictic truth—one that does not allow itself to be tinged or disguised—that this absolute power without comparison in our hemisphere, neglected to do all it could, much less all it could to essentially transform slavery's shameful legacy. It is not the case that Cuban descendants of slaves didn't make any progress regarding social demands over recent decades (some, the least important ones, and others who are more relative). Yet, it is shameful and disconcerting to compare today's results with the enormous gains that so stable, long lasting and exceptionally powerful and administration might have brought about. The island's government stubbornly and irrationally denies this inference. Thus, Cuba's official history and press, as well as scholars, academics and intellectuals who deal with the anti-racist issue from within the confines of the State's parameters, which put them in the lamentable (and sometimes ridiculous) position of mistreating history. They are much more interested in finding justifications and excuses than the conclusive truth. Of course, it is possible for them not to engage in this power game, but publicly playing it means reviewing the ranks of the revisionists and perhaps those belonging to the enemies of Cuba and socialism. Thus, it is understandable that many contain themselves and limit their opinions, since they may conclude that they are more useful as manageable anti-racists than unemployed ones, lacking a legal forum or procedure through which to express their demands.

Of course, those who govern, like gods on Earth, more or less, suffocate their spokespersons, but they don't kill them. It seems that in their desire to facilitate arguments in keeping with those in power, lately they have focused on finding solutions to this problem, publishing books, allowing studies and sponsoring or supporting periodic publications that for decades were shut down under lock and key. Concomitantly, they decided to re-evaluate the limitations or open censure that for so long weighed on religious expressions of African origin. There has also been a historical rescue of topics, events and people that were relegated to obscurity by historians and the public education system. In addition, there are now spaces for civically oriented organizations especially interested in the history and legacy of slave descendants, an element basic to our Cuban nationality that has never received the attention it requires. Everything is happening at once and notable urgency, all under the government's aegis or iron control, all within the limits it imposes. Naturally, despite its smallness, one must appreciate this good news. What contradicts this, and is shamefully revealing, is to realize that this has all happened in a very brief period of time, when one compares that to the many decades the government let pass without even trying to address this problem. Besides, this is now happening in the midst of an unprecedented economic crisis. So, if we analyze this with minimal rigor, the measure the government is facilitating for its defenders situates them in the uncomfortable position of attempting to theoretically validate something that is currently being invalidated in practice.

It is not good for the government to allow contradictions such as this (and so many others) to be thoroughly examined, which is why it resorts to indolently mediating the

anti-racist debate, numbing its most faithful activists and condemning those who try to escape the fold. It also fuels the resentment of some against members of the opposition, whose anti-racist champions must not only suffer absolute exclusion from events, forums and publications that are now opening up a space for the topic, but are must also endure harassment, persecution and arrest at the hands of the political police.

The dilemma

The latest case of a Cuban, anti-racist activist who has been forced to endure the barbs resulting from this governmentally imposed dilemma is Roberto Zurbano, a leftist intellectual and State functionary. He served as Director of the Fondo Editorial of the Casa de las Américas publishing concern right up till he made the mistake of criticizing the government in a piece that was published not just anywhere, but in the *New York Times*.¹ He reproached it for having not yet been able to reverse the legacy of racism while it was also promoting supposed reforms that would fully hinder black and *mestizo* Cubans instead of benefit them. This is just one more chapter in the sorry story of abusive power that sinisterly conspires against the anti-racist debate. Perhaps, I need not reproduce here the details, since the case luckily had great repercussions in the international information media. I will barely details a few things that are intimately linked with the issue here at hand.

Above all, it is likely that Zurbano's rapid demotion at Casa de las Américas (from director to simple analyst) was not expressly decided by government higher ups. What is common in cases of speaking out like this is that they are done at the Communist Party level and administrators at the workplace who

sometimes, with the (lamentable) acquiescence of the victim's own workmates, hurry to do this dirty work to show those in higher power how reliable they are when it comes to applying revolutionary intransigence. This is purely the result of the hard legacy of old purging exercises that were so popular in the Soviet Union during the Stalinist period; it has never ceased being practiced in Cuba throughout the entire period of revolutionary government at all levels and in all spheres of political, sociocultural and economic life. This power limits itself to general rules, which could more or less and implicitly follow these guidelines: *whoever is against me, is against the homeland; whoever expresses criticism that is adverse to me, that person is serving the enemies of socialism and is, de facto, an accomplice of that large foreign power that is trying to restrict the independence and sovereignty of our country*. Once these guidelines are applied and circulated, they impose themselves, just like that. Each greater or lesser leader, and each individual, generally, knows how to behave not only concerning any danger of violating these guidelines, but also in regards to the attitude one should display towards those who violate them, as the old saying goes: the enemy of my friend is my enemy.

Another aspect that is interconnected with the saga of the Stalinist style purges, which also characterizes the Zurbano case, as well as in any others having to do with anti-racism, is double talk or, in other words, a rhetoric of double morality the government employs. The gist of it consists in making those who want to believe (and above all those for whom it is convenient to believe) that the government is allowing disagreement and is even interested in fomenting a climate of open debate. Ideal vehicles for this political mischief tend to be certain allegations by anti-

racist activists issued under the government's control, particularly those for whom an image of "complainers" has been created. Yet, it always conveniently leaves clear that they issue their protests "within the revolution." Thus, a denunciation issued by historian, independent journalist and radical anti-racist activist Leonard Calvo Cárdenas, who is with the peaceful, political opposition, is the most illustrative example we have. In his article "All Against Zurbano," Calvo Cárdenas proposes"²

"A few days after Dr. Esteban Morales, at a debate on the subject, made an impassioned call to make the race problem the topic of political discussion all through society—under State control—he emerged as one of the critics who lambasted what intellectual Robert Zurbano said in the *New York Times*, criticizing his details and perspective on the social and economic situation of Afro-descendant Cubans."

Even so, Morales has had to lighten up a bit. He lacks the autonomy to defend to the end what he said, but cannot remain silent either because the authorities would assume his silence meant he agreed with the text he was critiquing. Yet, there are obviously no important contradictions between Zurbano's and Morales' anti-racist ideas, and the latter of whom is a Communist Party academic and militant who is well known for his unconditional support for the government, despite the fact he also went through a bad time for transgressing official rhetoric and later had to make a retraction under pressure. This last detail may be why Morales have felt obliged to exaggerate his tone in his response to Zurbano, so much so that he avoided any dialectic and instead categorically and a priori affirmed that change in Cuba's political leadership today could bring no benefits to blacks.³

In fact, there are no unsalvageable contradictions between Zurbano's ideas and those of official intellectuals who jumped to discredit his article (at least in the anti-racist essence). Their indiscreet intention was to push him into making a retraction. The problem is in their varying foci, as Leonardo Calvo has aptly observed in the aforementioned article, upon evaluating these intellectuals' shameful position: "Said position thoroughly reveals just how disconnected Cuban leaders and their spokespersons are from reality and current social interrelations. They refuse to and cannot admit (nor is it in their best interests) that modernity, prosperity and justice are constructed upon underpinnings of independence and the civil, economic and cultural empowerment of individuals and collectivities...while Zurbano makes his judgments about the present and future of Cuba, his detractors are establishing a justificatory and self-serving dialogue with a past whose reality they distort and manipulate for their benefit in order to maintain an image of supreme revolutionary saviors."⁴

It might be useful to explain that the unchanging, politically opportunistic attitude of Zurbano's critics is not only passé by now, after half a century of progress in the world and reactionary stagnancy on the part of Cuba's government, but was old and even counterrevolutionary from the very moment it took power.⁵ More over, this has been weighing upon the historical tragedy of Cuba's slave descendants since that time, as well. It is noteworthy that one of the most persistent critiques launched against Zurbano concerned his youthfulness, which, according to his critics has not allowed him to really know what the reality of blacks and *mestizos* was in Cuba prior to the revolution's triumph. It is as though history were like coffee, which we should drink hot and only in small doses when

we wake up each day. If not for the fact that this statement is disconcerting, for its mediocrity and superficiality, it might be laughable. Yet, it is also important to recall that there have been Cuban anti-racists (and anti-government critics) ever since the early days of the revolutionary government, throughout the last fifty years or so. They paid a very dear price for their attempt to contradict official rhetoric, based on what they saw everyday, with their own eyes, even from within the revolution.

The only difference is that back then it was not easy for the government to silence these demanding voices, due to the lack of intercommunication in the world, in general, and very specifically in Cuba. Back then, Stalinist purges and apparatchiks trained to silence rebels were as common and scandalous as now, perhaps even more so—but news of them did not appear in the press. Nevertheless, more than one of these cases was documented, and there they are, to keep us from lying. There are examples like that of Walterio Carbonell, a revolutionary writer, diplomat, leftist intellectual and, above all, relentless, loud mouthed anti-racist. His attitude and work caused him to have to live more than half of his life isolated, being misunderstood and painfully and unjustly in his professional and personal life.

No one, not even those official scribes who attempted to intellectually destroy Zurbano could deny today that Walterio Carbonell's only mistake was to insist that the contributions and even important role of blacks as essential to the creation of our nationality be acknowledged. Yet, what they got and still get is to be situated as second-class citizens by our historians. This is why this indefatigable anti-racist lost everything and had to spend the rest of his long and difficult existence in an

anonymous corner of the José Martí National Library, his possibility of practicing his activism limited to the extreme, shrugged off and, even worse, discredited and labeled a mental deficient. This was his lot from the early days of the revolution to recent times.

Early in 1961, Carbonell had published *Cómo surgió la cultura nacional* [How our National Culture Emerged],⁶ an essay that was not only radical and rumbustious (the most radical and rumbustious in Cuban history), but also an inescapable point of departure and basic tool for revisiting subjects and foci concerning the essential contributions of slaves to the creation of Cuba and its culture. It was (and is) a lucid treatise developed by a leftist intellectual who never—not then nor at any other time—refused to project his vision from within Marxist theory's framework and that of the Cuban revolution—despite the merciless ostracism to which he was sentenced. Yet, rather than provoking a constructive, enriching debate that was impossible to put off (even more so at that time of clamorous revolutionary triumphs), the essay brought nothing but trouble and disillusionment for its author. I do not have enough space here to go into details about Carbonell's book. Suffice it for me to recommend the reader devour and even reread his book in its entirety. It is one of those books to which we should return with devoted insistence, especially because a number of its proposals are as cogent now as they were then, and they are waiting for someone to finally awaken the just from the long sleep to which they have been condemned.

It would suffice to briefly recall that he proposed we reevaluate our so-called “creators of Cuban nationality,” all of them white, a task that is still pending. Similarly, he offered warnings that have remained unheeded, for example:

“That a colonialist conception of our culture is still valid among us is lamentable,” or another one, quite in tune with what we are dealing with here, “[Because] the bourgeoisie established its authority not only on economic and political power, but also on the power of the lies their cultured men issued forth. In addition, because today many of those lies are held as true, even by the revolutionaries, and have contributed to liberating our country from bourgeois domination, but have been incapable of liberating themselves from the power of bourgeois ideology.”

Walterio Carbonell (1920-2008) died in Havana in isolation, mercilessly squashed, desperately poor, but still supporting the revolution, which he loved unconditionally and uncritically, even though hopeless.

How the dilemma became a cruel tragedy

The current flashpoint of the anti-racist dilemma in Cuba can be found among activist members of the peaceful, political opposition. It is also important to situate within its context the best proof of the role those in power are having in the lifting of this divisive, insuperable barrier between Cuban representatives of anti-racist activism. Just when pro-government intellectuals were wasting their valuable time scheming to force Zurbano to eat the crow of a retraction, Berta Soler, a black woman, the valiant, anti-racist, pro-democracy and pro-progress leader of the noble and peaceful Ladies in White, was being attacked in Spain by boisterous, raging idiots organized into repudiation squads by the Cuban embassy with the sole purpose of not allowing her to freely proclaim her truths, even on foreign soil. None of Zurbano’s antagonists admitted to knowing about this infamous attack. Evidently, it did not inter-

est them, despite their having to remain silent and complicit in the face of such barbarities, which were, in essence, committed against a defenseless descendant of slaves. This is not appropriate behavior for real anti-racists; nor is it decent, and this was not the first or last such incident. Many have been the beatings the Ladies in White (many of them black and *mestizo*) have had to endure on Havana’s streets, in broad daylight, from the political police and hosts of governmental, paramilitary personnel.

Orlando Zapata Tamayo, one of the thousands of blacks kept in subhuman conditions inside the regime’s prisons, carried out a hunger strike for the sole purpose of receiving more civilized treatment from his jailers. They let him die slowly, for 86 days, minute by minute, and the government did not care. Neither did one single member of the anti-racist intelligentsia say a word to request leniency, at least. Once Zapata died, some of them rushed to lie publicly, alleging that he had been a criminal. He was resoundingly not, but even if he had been, this detail saved the government and its spokespersons from disgrace. The very same thing happened during the hunger strike of another slave descendant, Guillermo Fariñas, a peaceful oppositionist who is also a psychologist, independent journalist, and winner of the Sakharov Award (2010). Then there is the case of three young black men with no record of violence who were shot for the bloodless seizure of a vessel with which to leave the island. From the very first moment, everyone knew that Fidel Castro used the death of these three young men to offer a cold and ruthless lesson. Of course, after that terrible event of April 11, 2002, relations between black Cubans and the government never went back to being the same.

For some (perhaps prejudiced and no doubt skillful) reason, the fact that there are an ever-increasing number of blacks and *mestizos* joining peaceful opposition groups in Cuba is being ignored. Similarly, it is often the case that no attention is being paid to the revealing fact that a number of the oppositionist movement's leaders are Afro-descendants. Of course, this has gotten anti-racist activism to be seen as a constant among the daily objectives and actions of the opposition. It is more than obvious that many of the initiatives adopted lately by the government that seem to be responding to demands or are being defended by anti-racists who are useful to it, are addressing nothing more than its haste to appropriate the ideas and demands of the anti-racist dissidents, who sometimes unwittingly validate officialdom, pushing it to the actions it takes much more due to its desire to not lose ground before the oppositionists than for any act of consciousness. It is yet more proof that anti-racism in Cuba today has become a sort of bone of contention (from the government's point of view, at least), in which what are at risk is the black and *mestizo* drama, and political power. At least, this is how it is understood by those who control it.

The wave of abuses, intolerance, injustices, defamations, physical and psychological abuses, imprisonment and social marginalization that Cuban anti-racist activists against the government's policies have stoically endured is something that on its own is enough to make one question the transparency of official rhetoric on anti-racism. Political repression against peaceful and inclusive, anti-racist events and initiatives is but another, long chapter in this story. Its unprecedented nature must make it hard for those who have not profoundly explored Cuba's contemporary reality to understand.

Just a few months ago, State Security agents boldly blocked the celebration in Havana of the second Race and Citizenship Forum that was organized by the Citizens' Committee for Racial Discrimination (CIR), whose membership includes a number of outstanding black activists in the peaceful, political oppositionist movement. The CIR is precisely one of those (representative) organizations (although it is not the only one) that constantly creates tension for the government and its repressive forces. Nevertheless, its leaders do not refuse to exchange ideas and proposals with the government, much less with officialdom's anti-racists. On the contrary, the latter are who believe the CIR members to be enemies and not only don't acknowledge their reasoning, but not even their right to legally engage in anti-racist activism.

It is totally paradoxical and disheartening that this organization be the most respected one outside of Cuba. The CIR was the first civic organization that had an audience at the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) at the Organization of American States (OAS) on the rights of Afro-descendants. It has been nominated by a number of international institutions for the King of Spain Prize for Human Rights, was invited to attend the First International Congress of Afro-Descendants in Honduras and generally established very fruitful, collaborative relationships with the international movement that is promoting the values and rights of Afro-descendants. Meanwhile, in its own country it is officially disdained, marginalized and persecuted.

One of the things the CIR and all the other anti-racist activists who operate at the regime's margins, are typically accused of is that they are conspiring against national unity. It doesn't take much to see that this ac-

cusation is one more excuse offered by those in power to prevent or limit as much as possible that the anti-racist debate stray from officialdom's controlled space and extend to the general population. This accusation, of course, holds no water. Nothing would please the real anti-racists more than unity among all Cuban blacks and *mestizos*, and all Cubans, in general. Conversely, this would be terrible for the power elite, which explains why it employs a really recalcitrant, omnipresent and cruel 'divide and conquer' strategy. It knows that the only way it can preserve its power for the

longest time possible (which is getting short every day) is to impose an act of faith on scientific truth.

Blind faith, never lacking a bit of opportunism, conservatism and convenience characterizes the attitude of skilled intellectuals. This mercilessly and unscrupulously behavior condemns anyone who tries to question the old myths. It is precisely at the root of this evil formula that the dilemma that today's Cuban anti-racism and its activists endure—some more than others, already really all of them—rests.

Notes:

- 1-Zurbano, Roberto. "For Blacks in Cuba, the Revolution Hasn't Begun," *The New York Times* (March 23, 2013).
- 2-Calvo Cárdenas, Leonardo. "Todos contra Zurbano," (April 10, 2013). <http://www.cubanet.org/>
- 3-Morales, Esteban. "La Revolución cubana comenzó en 1959," *La Jiribilla* 621 (March 30-April 5, 2013).
- 4-Calvo Cárdenas Leonardo. "Todos contra Zurbano," *loc. cit.*
- 5-See dossier with articles responding to Roberto Zurbano, *La Jiribilla*, ed. cit.
- 6-Carbonell, Walterio. *Cómo surgió la cultura nacional*. La Habana: Ediciones Bachiller (Colección Escribanía, Segunda Edición Corregida, 2005).