

The Effect of Totalitarianism on Racism and Racial Discrimination in Cuba

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The alarming virulence of racist prejudice and discrimination among whites, blacks and *mestizos* in today's Cuba should not be examined without considering a number of permanent and intrinsic elements within the totalitarian State's infrastructure, where the problem has been worsening. Concomitantly, given the fact this issue is something Cuban society has faced and seem likely to face in the future, it is not realistic that one can assess this problem's true dimensions if in the limited space I am afforded in this article if I don't explain its origin and development within the preceding republican form of government.

Origins

The slow and troublesome ascent of racial integration used to be defined favorably within a context of social harshness in republican-democratic Cuba. It had its ups and downs. Slow as it was, it did take shape in a configuration that divided power using constitutional methods to do so.

For fifty years, it gained and lost ground paradoxically, until it was finally, dramatically interrupted, first, because its institution continuity was obstructed under the Batista regime,

and then devastated by the armed revolution that triumphed in 1959.

The nation was shocked and caught unaware by a new national mechanism for social acceleration. Burdened by full panoply of Martí-inspired, mythic nationalism, and proclaiming itself the legacy and continuity of the frustrated wars of independence, this New Order shook everything up from the inside out. Shortly after, the scene took on no-holds-barred, telluric dimensions (perhaps like in early, nineteenth-century Paraguay, or Trujillo's right-wing, totalitarianism in the Dominican Republic), hurtling the country beyond any of its previous historical experience.

The institutionally promised restoration of society by means of a new, national mechanism of social acceleration that was announced by all the forces and groups that rebelled and finally triumphed over Batista became a moot point almost immediately, by a new, national principle: totalitarianism. As a result, the new regime forcefully began a rapid social, economic and political deconstruction, and any notion of traditional order disappeared from Cuba.

This emergent, devastating program, which was first imposed in a rather hidden manner, and then unashamedly and openly, was

enthusiastically received by a large part of the population—at first. Our leader deliriously supported the rapid deconstruction of our institutional order, which beforehand had guarded our intrinsic freedoms as citizens. He promoted a new, absolutist form of governance.

In a few months, all of civil society's legal and civic institutions were brutally voided and transformed. Civil and democratic practices that for all their troublesome ups and downs had existed for 57 years, and all institutions that guaranteed the basic structure of a State of Law, and the defense of the population from unpunished abuse from the State's power, disappeared.

In terms of their will and direction, a nation of participating citizens was replaced by a pro-Castro group and its unappealable decisions made under guidance from the legendary, impious, narcissistic, iron fist of a possessive, turbulent and sinister personality.

And, like so many other processes in the republic's still painful configuration and adjustment, traditional racism and racial discrimination, scourges inherited from colonial slavery, were decreed non-existent by the stroke of a pen. The simple effect of this force and the overwhelming weight of this power applied to the entire nation created the dangerous illusion that these extremely complex ethnic and cultural problems, and other social conflicts, could be decreed as such, and then disappear from our society as if by magic.

The Effect

The scene was completely unbelievable. A quick and luxury-loving nation, with a pronounced propensity to material progress and, by the way, very lightly attached to its Hispanic (Spanish) roots in facing the deluge of U.S. modernity, which was so in keeping with its interests and a supreme model to follow, became suddenly austere and uniform. It became a unique

and very aggressive way, in and of itself, of thinking and seeing reality, a committed enemy of its neighbor to the North. It turned this ferocity in on itself with incredible rigor, a ferocity that in early 1959 seemed an inescapable way to keep old enemies and make new ones.

It is crucial to emphasize this last thing. Brutal and disproportionate punishment meted out savagely on the entire Cuban population, basing itself on the parameters of intolerance dictated by the *caudillo's* credo, and shaped by the evil attributes of Soviet-style totalitarianism. This was Cuba's new Big Brother; it gave Cuba's leader unrestricted support and healthy fear of and from its own nucleus of power.

As far as race was concerned, this caused a paradox. Blacks and *mestizos* considered themselves to have benefited from all the many equal rights they had received, when compared to most of the white majority. As happened with everyone else, they too were being forcefully situated and not being asked their opinion about it. They had to accept—within the limited confines set by the government, whatever the regime—which was increasingly imposing its rabid will—dictated as irrevocably correct or convenient for the “Socialist” State-Revolution-Country. In this contradictory milieu, once the very first, utopian dreams of no more racism or racial discrimination were shattered, both scourges lingered and survived in an even worse way, like a voracious zombie that would not go away.

The results

The permanent state of institutionalized violence and intolerance was overwhelming not only because of the scale to which they increased and the forced punishment of any thought or individualism at a national level, but also because it intoxicated Cuban society with the same two scourges, as well as with deception and corruption. Like a malicious salve, the power elite

spread this like an evil, sticky, infectious salve, which became most obvious in our behavior. In effect, they became deformed, common characteristics of our daily lives and survival as Cubans.

Little by little, as frustration and abuse increased, this deformation became a sort of byproduct of totalitarianism. Like an incipient and growing nausea, its corrupt and corrupting effects penetrate most of our traditional, ethical and cultural values, which have been silenced for their supposed failure. Betrayal, fear of horrendous, political retribution; the revolution's fraudulent, moral attributes; which hide the deformation, greediness, ambition and cruelty of this maelstrom, which is further worsened by crippling poverty, poisoned race relations. This is also due to the constant punishment and repression that have become law and is used to assault the population, particularly those segments living in the worst conditions. All this is responsible for heightening lack of trust, rancor, prejudices and violence between whites, blacks and *mestizos* at the current time.

Worse yet, the lives of blacks and *mestizos* have not improved so much since the triumph of the revolution. In fact, even within the limits of all the propaganda about their supposed exodus from irremediable poverty in republican times, their real ability to progress and achieve well-being was regulated, limited and controlled by the very same rigid patterns of forced poverty endured by the rest of the country. Even their probable and essential increase in numbers has been affected by the hopeless and harsh poverty that has become our national destiny.

Once the imperfect but stimulating, paradigmatic model for personal improvement and societal recognition in operation in the previous, now destroyed, democratic society, the new program for the creation of the New Man proved itself to be false and cynical, an unstable and untrustworthy version of goods and civilized customs took hold, something that was

transmittable and inheritable by only a choice few—and this more due to the unrestricted fidelity and obsequious obedience of the system in power than its own, unstable social and economic worth.

Any Cuban now knows that this is nothing less noteworthy than having been a professional cane cutter for twenty sugar harvests, winner of the *Emulación Socialista* [Socialist Competition] Prize or being called *Héroe Nacional del Trabajo* [National Worker Hero]. It is important to emphasize this: whites, blacks and *mestizos* have been defrauded and subjected with this very same pipe dream.

Now, when we're living during a time of total decline into ever-increasing, national poverty, this vacillating, totalitarian model has crumbled. It was replaced by the surreptitious presence of opportunistic *nuevos ricos* [nouveau riche]; they embody all the social defects of our massification. Yet, they know how to take advantage of the poverty around them. Despite it all, this type of success, with its superficiality, and questionable superficiality for and honesty with Cuba's citizens (given the fact it exploits them, and as the fruit of individualism is less recommendable) represents a triumph of the massified, common man in confronting the poverty in which the regime forces him to live. For many blacks and *mestizos* who remain trapped in the poverty they inherited from their parents, the illegal and coveted, outlawed independence of "Sherwood's happy and free men," as a representation of triumph, becomes a bit interesting, if one considers timid limits that the system in power continues to impose on them.

Conclusions

As in the case of serious, contemporary, ethnic conflicts that cultural and religious differences have made savagely erupt, and have been forcefully silenced but not resolved (e.g., Yugoslavia and Tito-style totalitarianism; Rwanda

and the colonial regime that was followed by unstable and corrupt, nationalist governments), in the future, we should expect future, painful and unwanted racial conflicts once the Castro dictatorship ends or camouflages itself as a less controlling regime. We do not want this future conflict to take place, but contemporary, historical experience would seem to predict one.

The future scene is not all somber and overwhelming. An unusual and imponderable factor is the new, amalgamating, social democratic effect that comes with new communications technologies, which is growing and spreading, seemingly limitedly. Despite the fact the irresponsible, Cuban regime does whatever it can to function within this tsunami of international information and keeps the Cuban people as isolated as possible, this new era is triumphing over its ancient defense. This fascinating move towards modernity cannot be stopped; Cubans seem to have a limitless supply of energy for it.

The way these technologies are permeating the country will not only allow us to rapidly find more dignified and progressive models of civilization to take up and emulate, but will help greatly in facilitating communication with other countries and more effectively smooth over the rough spots—among them those racial ones inherited from the colonial and republican eras—that communist totalitarianism has taken to an never before seen extreme. For this reason, the enormous amount of information now available will be able to reign in our violence—even our interracial violence—as an antidote to the puerile fever that will ensue after Castroism is over and there is more freedom.

From now on it is of vital importance to understand that the framework with which to

most efficiently and peacefully clarify all the particulars of the latent confrontation, rancor and mistrust between Cuban whites, blacks and *mestizos* depends on that modern technological base and an undeniable premise to begin being able to deal honestly with this problem without reserve in an increasingly open and democratic country. Concomitant with this airing of these and other, harsh realities, all Cubans will be able to freely collaborate—even holding contradictory notions—but they will all be equally involved in the lengthy, laborious and successful (and sometimes not so successful) process of building a State of Law based upon respect for human rights, unrestricted defense of property and individual rights as fundamental rights, and a State of Law that protects legal democracy and the citizen freedoms for all in the event some future, narcissistic fool comes to power.

This is the basis upon which we will be able to slowly and surely overcome this racism, which has worsened over fifty years of government exacerbated and imposed poverty, intolerance and violence that has afflicted us during this lamentable period in our nation's history—without our depending on social miracles or fateful edicts.

This was just one of an avalanche of supposedly populist decrees. Yet, they involved prohibiting any possibility of individuality and personal critique on the part of the population. The plunder and impounding of private property was used efficiently as a tool to exact immediate obedience, making any possible resistance impossible. The majority was awed by this endless assault against everything it considered unjust and schematic, everything it saw as socially, economically or culturally harmful.