

## Chapter 5

### Challenges of the Racial Question in Cuba Esteban Morales Dominguez

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There are very few contemporary writings on the subject of race in this country, and the ones that do exist are by-and-large found in magazines, especially in *Temas* and *Catauro*<sup>i</sup>. There has been more publications abroad dealing with the subject on a contemporary basis. Aline Helg, Alejandro de la Fuente, and Carlos Moore are noteworthy for their extensive research. But none of them share the vicissitudes of daily life in Cuba with us, and this can be seen in their writings, even though they make notable contributions, whether or not we might share some of their opinions.

This situation tells us that in addition to the difficulties associated with this subject within present-day Cuban society - something we will deal with later - we have in effect handed over to them the task of analyzing a problem of vital importance in the country's life, with the resultant danger that - in response - we find ourselves having to clarify matters about which we have still not been able to have a scientific discussion of our own. Therefore, it is of prime importance that we try to work out our own vision, from the Island, of the racial problem in Cuban society in these complex times.

This objective encompasses a desire to examine the existence of this problem within present-day Cuban reality; making clear that it is not simply a case of inherited burdens, but rather is something that our society is still capable of generating; and calling attention to the danger that racism and discrimination could again take root as part of the macro consciousness in today's society.

The fundamental problems that we run up against regarding the subject of race include ignorance about it, continual avoidance of the topic, as well as insufficient treatment of the subject. Many people feel that it is not worth talking about this topic.

In *Desafios de la problematica racial en Cuba*<sup>ii</sup>, which this article summarizes, my aim was to develop a model for studying and researching this subject - in order to fill the need to theorize about it - and to examine the scope and form in which many phenomena are studied at present. In reality, with the exception of some of the investigative works of the Anthropology Center of CITMA [Ministry of Science, Technology, and Environment], which are still unpublished,<sup>iii</sup> we did not find earlier studies that are worthy of mention regarding either of those two aims. The vast majority of the Anthropology Center studies are the fruit of very praiseworthy research that have gotten caught up in the whirlwind of bureaucracy, ignorance, and fear of publicizing the findings.<sup>iv</sup>

It might seem that racism and discrimination had disappeared from Cuban society. At least that is what many believed. But the economic crisis of the end of the 1980s and beginning of the 1990s, with its strong traces of a social crisis, caused racism to resurface with the virulence that can be expected from a problem that, having been seen as solved, in fact was not. To imagine it had been solved was a form of the worst kind of pure idealism.

Racism and racial discrimination was eliminated from the institutional frameworks of the state and the government with the triumph of the Revolution in 1959. But the phenomenon maintained a toehold in the family, individual attitudes, and some institutions, and today there is the danger of its reestablishment in the macro consciousness of Cuban society. This could take place through mechanisms that inject prejudice and negative racial stereotypes into the population, as well as through the dynamics of relations between the formal institutions and the informal networks of power.<sup>v</sup>

Therefore, we need to take stock of this phenomenon. We need to examine the mechanisms through which it spreads and how to help design tools that allow us fight it. In this regard I begin from a series of premises.

Racism arose from slavery. In the Americas slavery took the form of color. Blacks, most of the time poor, were brought in the slave ships from the west coast of Africa and turned into slaves. It did not take long for the enslavement of some human beings to be justified on the basis of their being black.

For generations, blacks and their descendants occupied the lowest rung in Cuban society – first colonial society and then neocolonial society. And we cannot expect that in a little less than a half-century since its triumph, the Revolution could fully lift them out of their situation of inferiority. All the more so if we consider that owing to certain historic vicissitudes, of all the social problems that the Revolution tackled since 1959, the racial question may have been the theme on which there has been the least progress.

We should not confuse the degree of social justice achieved by all the racial groups that make up our society today with the disappearance of racism, because racism is a very complex, multidimensional, and multi-causal matter that does not disappear solely through achievement of higher levels of social justice. Cuba is a tangible example of that.

In the years immediately following the triumph of the Revolution, social, economic, and political conditions emerged that practically made "color" disappear from the considerations of the typical Cuban, conditions which, in turn, also encouraged an idealistic view on the part of the political leadership as well as the majority of the citizenry - including the vast majority of blacks - that it was possible to forget about racism.

In 1959, the chief of the Revolution had frontally and very forcefully attacked the existing racial discrimination, which had been a direct inheritance from republican Cuba. However, not long afterwards, the language changed, the case was seen as "closed," and in 1962 the matter was declared solved. After that a long period of silence ensued.

In practice, the subject was no longer spoken of, until it reappeared in the second half of the 1980s, when the political leadership itself raised it. The more complex conditions that had encouraged silence concerning the subject of race gave way to the economic and political shockwaves of the end of the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s, giving rise to a more realistic vision about what had actually occurred with racism, which encouraged a more objective and critical analysis of the situation.

Proclaiming in 1962 that the problem of racial discrimination and racism had been solved was an error of idealism and wishful thinking. As a direct result of that, the subject of race has become the most avoided and ignored topic in our social reality. A significant segment of our intelligentsia pays it no attention and does not even deem it worthy of consideration, as a result of which there are even major differences among our intellectuals over where we stand in terms of the consolidation of the nation and its culture. However, speaking scientifically, there cannot be the slightest doubt that when we talk about "race" in Cuba - even though this is a social invention - we are talking about culture and nation.

Moreover, turning the subject into a taboo, removing it from all social and political arenas, gave rise to a social environment that made it more difficult to refer to racism. Those who brought it up were ideologically and politically repressed. In the sphere of culture the subject of race was still broached to a degree, but from the standpoint of the sciences it was impossible to do research on it, and especially to write about it. According to the prevailing view after 1962, in the midst of the political confrontation of those years, anyone who critically analyzed racism was playing into the hands of those who wanted to socially divide Cubans, and it earned them the epithet of being a racist or a divider, or both.

If you don't deal with "skin color" as what it is, a historical variable of social differentiation among Cubans, you can forget that blacks, whites, and mestizos did not start from the same place in taking advantage of the opportunities that the Revolution provided them. So it was overlooked that many of the poor were black, which represents an additional disadvantage, even within present-day Cuban society.

Color exerted its influence and even though blacks and mestizos were treated in exactly the same manner as poor whites, they remained at a greater disadvantage. Later it was shown that it was not enough to be born in the same hospital, to attend the same school and the same recreation center, if some children return to a tenement, to a marginal neighborhood, while others have a substantial house, parents earning good salaries and much better living conditions, conditions that do not characterize the immense majority of nonwhites, and especially blacks. The neighborhoods are different, as are the families and their living standards.

And although black and white children may have the same opportunities, this does not mean that all will be equally capable of overcoming the historic starting points bequeathed by their family, living conditions, neighborhood, etc. Unfortunately, social policies at the time of the triumph of the Revolution did not take skin color into account, with consequences that must now be corrected.

Other subjects are useful for exploring a series of problems that seriously affect the racial balance in the social, educational, and cultural spheres.

In those years, in the context of the needs of the struggle against imperialism, excessive priority was given to questions related to the national identity, and matters of cultural identity were often given short shrift. In that context, racism and discrimination were also fed by the stereotypes and prejudices against cultures originating from Africa. The upshot of this was that the dominance of so-called "white Hispanicism" still retained its hold in our culture, despite the efforts made to reemphasize the values of the African presence within the national culture. Although we see a high degree of integration in this culture, racism and white dominance still leave their mark on it. This type of situation can reflect a strong component of prejudices and negative stereotypes regarding the

values of cultures coming from Africa; although there is also a significant economic component, given that virtually all the African countries are poor.

In addition, unfortunately an ideo political atmosphere developed in Cuba wherein defining oneself racially is frowned upon. This affected the dynamics of personal identity, which must function as an integrated system, whose components, valued individually, are so important in fighting social perversions such as racism. A person must first know who he is before he can have the possibility of being part of some other thing. The consciousness of individuals can not be subsumed within the national consciousness; they make up an integrated system in which the whole does not function without the parts.

But this implicitly implies a strong respect for diversity, which has been lacking in Cuban society. Diversity is the objective, one with which we grapple every day. Unity is an unrealizable goal if it is not built within the context of diversity, a vital aspect if we are to be able to up root racism from our social and cultural reality.

Blacks and mestizos in Cuba, with very rare exceptions, do not have a genealogical tree and can not trace their surnames to Africa or to Spain. In particular, the identity of blacks has always been under strong assault. Blacks have had to navigate a road mined by racial discrimination and non recognition of their values. Even when the economic level of a black might have been similar to that of a white person, that did not save him from being racially discriminated against. This indicates that we are not simply dealing with an economic question.

With a certain amount of help white escapes from poverty and his color helps him escape being discriminated against for being poor. However, the other one carries the color of his skin with him. Therefore, even though he might escape poverty, he would continue to be excluded. What adaptation would allow the black person to leave discrimination behind; under what color could he hide? That is why although pulling him out of poverty might be difficult; achieving the conditions so that he is not discriminated against is even more difficult. These conditions are not just economic. They go much further.

One point that adds to the problems of the identity of blacks is that they tend not to have a recognized history. We have not been able to get beyond a version of our written history in which the black and the mestizo, but especially the black, are scarcely mentioned. With very few exceptions, found in independent works, we almost completely lack a social history of blacks and mestizos in Cuba that would be comparable, above all, with the one that exists for the white population. This situation affects all of Cuban society, which is unable to develop an integral, realistic view of its historic development and therefore not infrequently muddles along with a distorted image of the true role that each racial group played in the formation of the culture and the nation.

The way power is distributed in present-day Cuban society does not go beyond what existed prior to 1959; within society white dominance is still forcefully expressed, especially at the level of what is called the "new economy." This is especially evident in the absence of blacks in the upper leadership levels of the state, government, and institutions of civil society in general, although not in the party structure. A recent example is that there is not one single black among the fourteen provincial chairs of People's Power.

This is in complete contradiction to the leadership policy put forward by the Party in 1985, which is a long way from being realized in terms of racial representation. The matter is certainly

much more complicated than the question of whether or not there might be blacks and mestizos in all the positions, but undoubtedly what is happening seriously affects the participation of nonwhites in the structures of power.

The problems related to "whitening" still exist within our societal reality. What else would explain why so many people who are not white are unwilling to identify themselves that way? This distorts the census figures and moves the question of race into a realm of deception and hypocrisy, making it absurd to think that mysticism might be the solution, when what has to be mixed is various forms of consciousness in order to create a consciousness that makes color disappear so that, as Nicolas Guillen says, we come to "Cuban color." The attitude of many black or mestizo people toward their own pigmentation indicates that they do not find it advantageous to identify themselves as such.

Other aspects that are part of how present-day Cuban society presents itself ideologically are also affected, and these spheres also suffer from the imbalance in racial representation. We have a prime example in national television, where the number of blacks and mestizos in front of the cameras is very low. It is seen in the nearly total absence of blacks or mestizos in leading positions on our educational channels. The "challenge of the paradigms" exists, which requires that there be a balanced representation, especially on television, which has such an influence in providing role "models" and requires that all racial groups be represented.

The subject of race is not dealt with in school. This can result in a profound and dangerous dichotomy between scholastic education and social reality. We are not preparing our young people to deal with what they later find when they go out into the streets. Things do not pass into the culture unless they are introduced in the schools, and this is an important flaw in our education regarding a subject of vital importance. Our curricula and educational programs are still characterized by full-blown Occidentalism. African and Asian cultures are basically absent from the curriculum. As a result, students do not receive an integral and balanced education as members of a mono ethnic and multiracial society, so when they leave the classroom we cannot be sure that they understand the roots of Cuban culture, much less the nation's real history. In the majority of cases they have a Manichean and stereotyped vision of the most important aspects of that history. Not to mention that they ought to know who Aponte was, the history of the so-called Little War of 1912, and the Party of the Independents of Color.

As I said earlier, Cuban scientific work has barely begun to focus on the question of race. In the course of these nearly fifty years of the revolutionary process, almost all of the most important intellectual work on this subject, from the perspective of the social and human sciences, has been done outside Cuba.<sup>vi</sup> This is a weakness because we have almost totally handed over a vital aspect of our reality, with the resulting dangers that ensue for our scientific and cultural development and for the political and ideological struggle in defense of our social goals. Today in Cuba we have various challenges regarding this subject, which we must confront very seriously.

Trying to gain a fundamental understanding of the context of this problem - which produces such concern and prejudices - a problem that has for so long been ignored, swept under the rug, forgotten, neglected, and even repressed, has given rise to a very complicated situation if we consider it in the framework of political policies. There is no well-rounded understanding of the situation by all the institutions, social and political organizations, or leading sectors of the state apparatus. At times there is not even an acceptance that the problem exists. Instead we see resistance. As a result it is virtually impossible to predict the reactions that dealing with it openly might generate. In this

regard we see attitudes that run the gamut from a totally cynical approach, to fear and ignorance, all the way to the most heavy-handed denial of its existence.

Not dealing with a problem of such importance to our reality would continue to engender bewilderment, ignorance, and social discomfort in those who suffer the ill, whether directly or as a result of their having acquired a discriminatory ethic. It would lead to a level of social hypocrisy that would end up turning the racial problem into an endemic ill from which Cuban society could not recover, with consequences for societal coexistence, the nation, and Cuba culture. This is something that we must not leave to future generations. What kind of a basic overall culture can we have in a society that retains negative racial stereotypes, discrimination based on skin color, and racism? Society must come up with an integrated strategy to struggle against negative racial stereotypes, discrimination, and racism in today's Cuba. Such a strategy would start off from various assumptions, which will be summarized below.

This is a problem that Cuban social and economic statistics cannot continue ignoring. We must not pass over skin color and deal with social phenomena solely on the basis of classifying the population according to sex and age. Cuba is not Sweden or Holland. Skin color has historically been - and continues to be - a factor of social differentiation within the Cuban population. Race or skin color, class and gender, go hand in hand in the country's history. Skin color, social differences, poverty, imbalances in the distribution of power, discrimination, lack of empowerment, negative racial stereotypes, and racism have always gone together in the Island's history, and this has still not been overcome. What country are we talking about if we do not consider color as a fundamental trait in our population? What democracy can we speak of if one segment of our population continues being discriminated against because of skin color? This is a problem for all of society, not solely for blacks, whites, and mestizos. This means that it is something everyone has to solve. To do that, in the first place, to layout an effective working strategy, people must be made conscious that the problem exists. They need to understand the place that history reserved for each racial group; to realize that there is racism on the part of whites as well as blacks; a racism that stresses assigning each "their rightful place" flowing from of a structure of classes and power that allowed some to discriminate against others; to understand that the response to these differences cannot be to try to maintain a social dynamic based on prejudice, stereotypes, mutual discrimination and debt, but rather on the understanding of history and on an attitude of not making concessions to these evils and melding consciousness in order to uproot these evils from our culture and the Cuban way of life.

Only by openly dealing with the question can we put an end to the ignorance, cynicism, and hypocrisy that still lie below the surface when the question of race is discussed. Dealing with it openly can also help to develop an atmosphere in which it would be impossible to withdraw into some social space to practice racial discrimination. Certainly the subject of race implicitly contains a strong element of social division, but the only way to fight for a real, solid, integrated national culture is by not ignoring it. That is how we can build a culture within which all the forms of dominance that were spawned by the racist culture inherited from colonialism and capitalism can be overcome, a culture in which each racial group has its place within present-day Cuban society.

We should no longer acquiesce in avoiding the subject of race in order to maintain a form of harmonious social coexistence, because that is a false harmony, riddled with hypocrisy and prone to making concessions to racism and discrimination, as well as a context in which those who choose to maintain their prejudices and discrimination will always be able to find some place to do so.

Nor should we accept the idea that attacking racism and discrimination weakens Cuban society. Rather it is the complete opposite. As a point of fact, not fighting this evil is what divides society, weakens its culture, affects the national identity, and places the Revolution's social goals at serious risk, goals that must encompass nothing less than unity forged within diversity. The subject must be forcefully brought back into public discourse, it must be publicized, and it must be taken up in the political and mass organizations, so that it becomes what it should be and in fact is: a fundamental aspect of the already-launched battle of ideas.

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<sup>i</sup>It is worth mentioning the books of Tomas Fernandez Robaina and Sandra Morales, useful attempts to try to place the question within the context of present Cuban reality. See also the magazine *Catauro*, n. 6, Havana, July-December 2002, pp. 52-93; Juan Antonio Alvarado Ramos, "Relaciones raciales en Cuba. Nota de investigación"; Maria Magdalena Perez Alvarez, "Los prejuicios raciales: sus mecanismos de reproducción" and Maria del Carmen Calio Secade, "Relaciones raciales, proceso de ajuste y politica social," *Temas*, n. 7, July-September 1966, Havana, pp. 37, 44, and 58.

<sup>ii</sup>Esteban Morales, *Desafios de la problematica racial en Cuba*, Editorial de Ciencias Sociales, Havana, 2008.

<sup>iii</sup>*Temas* has published portions of the results of these studies. See Rodrigo Espina and Pablo Rodriguez, «Raza y desigualdad en la Cuba actual», *Temas*, n. 45, Havana, January-March 2006, and Pablo Rodriguez, «Espacios y contextos del debate racial actual en Cuba», *Temas*, n. 53, Havana, January-March, 2008 [editor's note].

<sup>iv</sup>Anthropology Center of the CITMA, Pablo Rodriguez, Ana Julia Garcia and Lazara Carrazana, "Relaciones raciales en la esfera laboral," unpublished, Havana, 1999; Rodrigo Espina, Estrella Gonzalez and Maria Magdalena Perez Alvarez, "Relaciones raciales y etnicidad en la sociedad cubana contemporanea," unpublished, Havana, 2003; Ana Julia Garcia, Estrella Gonzalez Noriega and Hernan Tirado Toirac, "Composición racial en la estructura de cuadros," unpublished, Havana, 2003

<sup>v</sup>Institutional racism does not exist in Cuba, meaning it is not built into the politico-social system or the institutions as was the case before 1959. The revolutionary process, with its antidiscriminatory ethos, drove racism back into what are now its principal niches: the family, the individual consciousness of many people, the so-called "emergent economy," and some exclusionary groupings, where it still exists because the definitive battle against racism which is now called for did not take place. This shortcoming led to its concealment, only to reemerge now, when the contacts with the market economy, the reemergence of inequalities, and the whole economic and social deterioration that resulted from the crisis of the 1990s are being felt.

<sup>vi</sup>See Rebecca J. Scott, *Slave Emancipation in Cuba: The Transition to Free Labor, 1860-1899*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1985 (published in Cuba by Editorial Carninos, Havana, 2001); Alejandro de la Fuente, *Una nación para todos. Raza, desigualdad y politica en Cuba. 1900-2000*, Colibri, Madrid, 2000; Carlos Moore, *Castro, the Blacks, and Africa*, Center for Afro-American Studies, University of California Press, Los Angeles, 1989; Robin Moore, *Musica y mestizaje. Revolución artistica y cambio social en La Habana, 1920-1940*, Colibri, Madrid, 1997.