

## Racism, Culture, and Mobilization

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The group Hermanos de Causa puts it best in one of their poetic rap lyrics: “Don’t you tell me that there isn’t any, because I have seen it; don’t tell me that it doesn’t exist, because I have lived it... Don’t say there is no racism where there is a racist... prejudice is always there.” They are not alone in denouncing what many Cubans perceive as a growing social problem: the persistence of racial prejudice and discrimination. Even authorities now acknowledge that the island is not free from racism and that ideas of race continue to affect the lives of ordinary Cubans in different ways.

The persistence of racial prejudice and even discrimination in a place like Cuba is somewhat surprising. The elimination of racism and racial inequality was one of the main goals of the revolutionary government and Cuban authorities proudly declared racism eradicated in the island since the early 1960s. Although this was not the case, it is nonetheless true that the massive structural transformations implemented by the revolutionary government during its early years in power resulted in a dramatic decline of various forms of social inequality, including those associated with race. Free and massive access to education, nutrition and social services, coupled with an aggressive redistribution of national income, resulted in a social leveling unprecedented in Cuban history. By the early 1980s several important indicators suggested that the Cuban experiment had been remarkably successful in reducing or eliminating racial inequality, particularly in those areas that had received systematic attention and generous funding from the government. The life expectancy of people identified as “negros” or “mestizos” in the 1981 census was only one year below that of whites—a minuscule gap in comparison to other multiracial societies in the Americas such as Brazil or the United States. Rates of schooling were similar, even at the university level. Illiteracy, which was higher among blacks than whites in pre-revolutionary Cuba, had basically disappeared. Employment distribution remained somehow unequal, but was low compared to Brazil and the United States. By the early 1980s Cuba was not the racial paradise that its authorities had frequently stated it was, but they could justifiably claim that the country’s relative success in combating racism was one of the great achievements of the socialist society.

Yet the Cuban approach had serious shortcomings. To begin with, racial inequality had greatly diminished, but it had done so particularly in areas which had been prioritized by the government, such as education and public health. In areas where government programs had been less successful, important differences associated with race remained. For instance, the government was never able to tackle successfully the chronic housing shortage. As a result, the regional distribution of the population continued to have strong racial undertones, with blacks concentrated in the poorest sectors of Havana and other cities. Although the government had decreed the elimination of racism and had created an ideal by which racist attitudes were not compatible with “the revolution,” some of its own policies contributed in fact to reaffirm the social

importance of race and to reproduce ingrained racist stereotypes. For example, the rates of incarceration were much higher for blacks than for whites, reflecting (as well as feeding) the widespread belief that blacks were naturally predisposed to commit crimes. If anything, the disproportionate representation of blacks among inmates could be used to highlight their inability to benefit from the opportunities that socialism had allegedly given them. The government had also opposed Afro-Cuban religious manifestations and persecuted its practitioners at various points, thus reproducing and sanctioning the traditional racist notion that identifies these cultural practices with savagery and barbarism.

One of the most important shortcomings of the government's approach was its inability to deal with the cultural and ideological roots of racism. As some government officials have acknowledged, they expected racism to wither away once its perceived structural bases were dismantled. It did not. There were two main problems with the government's approach. First, not all the "structural bases" of racism were dismantled, as the housing example demonstrates. Second, racism is not simply a question of maldistribution of resources, but a cultural and ideological complex that needs to be actively and systematically dismantled. The official declaration of racism as a solved problem produced the opposite effect. It precluded any effective public discussion of race in Cuban society and identified this important theme with enemy attempts to create "divisions" within the revolution. Race and racism were turned into taboos, untouchable political themes in public discourse. This does not mean, of course, that they disappeared from Cuban life or ceased to affect social relations. Quite the contrary. The official mantle of silence probably facilitated the unchecked creation and reproduction of racial images that continued to impact interpersonal relations in families, communities, schools, and workplaces. As with other difficult subjects, these ideas were frequently packaged in allegedly harmless jokes and discussed mostly in private spaces. Their social impact was limited, however, as the government retained significant control over the distribution of employment and other resources and remained committed to the vision of a racially-egalitarian nation. But this is precisely what changed dramatically in the 1990s: the government's centralized control over resources was significantly eroded and its egalitarian dreams sacrificed in part to the harsh imperatives of economic recovery.

Some of the inequities that became evident in the 1990s were the result of historic factors, such as past discrimination (which accounted for unequal access to good housing, for instance) or of the demographic and racial composition of the overwhelmingly white Cuban-American community, which provides significant resources to family members in the island through dollar remittances. Cuban scholars have estimated that whereas 30 to 40 percent of people identified as white receive dollar remittances, only 5 to 10 percent of blacks do.

Other differences, however, are much harder to explain without acknowledging the active role that racial discrimination plays in shaping social realities. Among these is the dismally low participation of blacks and mulattos in the dynamic tourist industry, the fastest growing sector of Cuba's economy. Although tourism typically creates low-paying service jobs, these positions are coveted because they provide personal access to

tourists and their dollars. The low representation of blacks in this sector cannot be explained in terms of past discrimination or lack of proper qualifications. In fact, up to the 1980s, when these jobs were not particularly attractive, blacks and mulattos were *over-represented* in what government documents defined as “gastronomy” and similar services. Their low representation in the tourist industry in the 1990s reflects a deliberate effort to minimize their presence—and therefore competition—in these attractive jobs.

It was in this juncture that racist ideas came to play a more active role in the allocation of scarce resources. In order to minimize the black and mulatto presence in tourism, white managers began to demand from prospective employees what they defined as a “pleasant appearance” (*buena presencia*), an aesthetic attribute which only people deemed to be white could fulfill. The same criteria has been applied to positions in the so-called joint ventures, companies financed and partly owned by foreign investors in which Cuban employees typically receive a portion of their salary in dollars. By creating supposedly objective indicators of desirability and competence that can be used to exclude Afro-Cuban job seekers from the most desirable positions, this ideology has helped to whiten the most desirable sectors of the labor market and to rationalize the process of exclusion. According to research done by the Centro de Antropología de Cuba, blacks barely represent 5 percent of the labor force employed in tourism and other dollar-related activities.

Excluded from these jobs and with limited access to dollar remittances many blacks and mulattos have sought since the 1990s to participate in the new economy via the informal sector. Many of these activities (hustling, peddling, and prostitution) are criminalized, thus contributing to reinforce the imbedded notion that blacks and mulattos are naturally inclined to an easy life of crime and corruption and averse to hard and honest work. And perceptions count. As many black and mulatto individuals can attest, it is not unusual—it may have even become customary—for black or mulatto strollers with a package to be stopped by the police and to be asked to furnish identity papers. This is the case even in areas where non-whites represent the majority of the population: “Here in Santiago [de Cuba], only blacks are asked to provide identity papers. That is racism,” a white resident in the city told *Carta de Cuba*. An African American who visited the island in 2003 was baffled when guards kept stopping him at the entrance of his hotel. People kept explaining to him that he “looked Cuban” and, as he eventually learned, “the unwritten rule in Cuba is that if you are Cuban, you do not go to the good hotels, especially if you are black.” Numerous testimonies confirm that whites are rarely stopped. And although hard data on police records is very difficult to obtain, there is again unanimity that people characterized as black or mulatto are grossly over-represented among inmates, with many observers estimating a proportion as high as 80 or even 90 percent.

The growing racial gap that has characterized Cuban society since the early 1990s, plus the growing assertiveness of openly racial discourses in public life, have contributed significantly to the perception that “race” is an important element in the crisis. An additional ingredient in this vision is the Cuban-American community, which defines itself as overwhelmingly white and whose perceptions of race and class would

clash with those of the blacks and mulattos resident in Cuba. The official media in Cuba has consistently depicted the Cuban-American community as a racist and conservative community that dreams of the restoration of its old economic and social privileges. They would seek to recover not only their properties and material goods, but also their privileged social and racial status. To put it bluntly, the return of the exiles would add a new layer of racism and tension to an already racially-explosive situation. All these elements point to the salience of race in Cuban society, now and in the future. Although the economic crisis that began in the early 1990s affected all Cubans, blacks and whites have experienced the crisis differently. Afro Cubans will thus enter a post-Castro Cuba with specific grievances and needs that they will likely translate into concrete economic, social, and political demands.

Although it is difficult to articulate these demands in the current political environment, black and mulatto intellectuals and activists have begun to make claims and to denounce their social subordination using different cultural mediums. A vibrant Afro-Cuban cultural movement is apparent in music, visual arts, theater, literature, and religion. All these expressions seek to carve out a social and cultural space from which Afro Cubans are able to reassert the centrality of blackness to Cubanidad and from which they can protest racial discrimination.

The 1999 art exhibit “Queloides” at the Center for the Development of Visual Arts in Havana exemplifies this in the area of visual arts. The exhibit offered what curator Alexis Esquivel described as “a non-romanticized vision of the daily experience of Cuban blacks” and a forum to raise “questions and concerns about racial prejudice in Cuba.” Some of the artists participating in the exhibit, such as Esquivel himself and Elio Rodríguez, questioned the impact of tourism on the creation of visual stereotypes of Afro-Cubans. Others, such as photographer René Peña, used their work to expose and ridicule racist fears. His photograph of the nude torso of a black man in which the penis is replaced by a prominent sharp knife exposed the widespread stereotype of the sexually-voracious black rapist.

Racism and racist stereotypes are also denounced in the work of Juan Roberto Diago, another of the young painters who exhibited in Queloides. His 2002 exhibit “Comiendo Cuchillo” (literally, Eating Knife), proudly proclaims the centrality of Africa and of Afro Cubans to Cuban history and culture, while exposing ingrained stereotypes about blacks. For example, one of his paintings deals with the widespread racist cliché that blacks have “bad” hair. Titled “Autoretrato” (Self-portrait), it contains the following text: “Mi pelo también es bueno” or “My hair too is good”. Another piece of work—“España devuélveme a mis dioses” (Spain give me my Gods back)—displays an equally explicit text: “Difícil no es ser hombre, es ser negro” (The hard thing is not to be a man, but to be black).

Young black and mulatto musicians, particularly rappers, have expressed similar concerns. Cuban rappers gained visibility in the mid 1990s, when they managed to organize the first festival of rap in the island, which eventually became an annual event. While these festivals guarantee some degree of state control over this cultural expression,

they also allow for a larger circulation of rap and its politically-charged messages in Cuban society. In these festivals many important voices of the movement have been heard, including some that are fairly critical of the government. The diffusion of this music in the mainstream media continues to be limited, although their work is occasionally played on radio, in programs such as “A propósito,” which is hosted by poet and writer Roberto Zurbarano.

Rappers, however, refuse to shut up. *A mí me quieren callar, a mí, ¿por qué?* (“They want to silence me, me, why?”) the all-female group Las Krudas demand in one of their lyrics. *Yo no callaré* (“I won’t go silent”), say Hermanos de Causa. Not only do Cuban rappers refuse to go silent, but their songs deal with a multitude of socially-difficult issues, including questions of race and discrimination. For instance, some rappers have addressed the question of racial profiling by the police. *Policía, policía tú no eres mi amigo, para la juventud cubana eres la peor pesadilla* (“Policeman, policeman, you’re not my friend, for young people in Cuba you’re the worst nightmare”), sings the group Papá Humbertico. *Mi color te trae todos los días... a toda hora, la misma persecución* (“My color brings you every day, always the same harassment”), concurs Alto Voltaje.

Young rappers have also used their music to raise more general questions about the persistence of racism and racial discrimination in Cuban society. A paradigmatic song by Hermanos de Causa exemplifies this discourse well. It is titled *Tengo* (“I have”). This is of course a parody of Nicolás Guillén’s famous 1964 poem with the same title. Guillén’s *Tengo* was a chant to the achievements of the revolutionary government in the area of racial equality, written by one of the most accredited voices of the Afro-Cuban intelligentsia, a poet who had been deeply involved in the struggles for racial equality during the republic. The poem listed all that blacks “had” under the revolution, from access to beaches and hotels, to jobs and education. “I have,” concluded Guillén’s poem, “what I had to have.” Thirty five years later, Hermanos de Causa begged to disagree. Their portrayal of what Afro Cubans have is very different: *Tengo una raza oscura y discriminada. Tengo una jornada que me exige y no da nada. Tengo tantas cosas que no puedo ni tocarlas. Tengo instalaciones que no puedo ni pisarlas... Tengo lo que tengo sin tener lo que he tenido* (“I have a race that is dark and discriminated against. I have a workday that’s exhausting and pays nothing. I have so many things that I can’t even touch. I have so many places where I can’t even go. I have what I have without getting what I’ve had”).

Parallel to this growing cultural activism, writers, academics and social scientists inside and outside the island have been begun to study the problem of race. This growing body of scholarship has underlined the continuing importance of race in Cuban society, studied Afro-Cubans’ traditions of mobilization, and explained the processes by which their cultural expressions have become part of national culture. Some of these works have been published in the island, in journals such as *Temas* and *Catauro: Revista Cubana de Antropología*. The first issue of 2005 of *La Gaceta de Cuba* was devoted entirely to questions of race in Cuban contemporary society.

The development of this cultural movement has had no parallel in the political arena, and conditions for the creation of independent political organizations remain much more hostile. Yet at least two organizations were created in the 1990s with the express goal of combating racism and racial discrimination. They are the Cofradía de la Negritud (Brotherhood of Blackness) and the Movimiento de Integración Racial (Movement of Racial Integration–MIR) “Juan Gualberto Gómez.” These movements seek to denounce the resurgence of racism in Cuban society, the exclusion of blacks and mulattos from the most lucrative economic activities, and the over-representation of Afro Cubans among inmates. They seek to pressure the state into enacting concrete policies to eliminate the growing racial gap and call for a national campaign against racism and prejudice.

These organizations have appealed primarily, but not exclusively, to blacks and mulattos. They present themselves as cross-racial movements that advocate the effective and equal integration of all Cubans, regardless of race, into a single national project. It is no coincidence that both the Cofradía and the MIR claim Juan Gualberto Gómez, the great Afro-Cuban advocate of racial integration and collaborator of Martí, as their main patriotic symbol. Yet these associations anticipate what is likely to be a growing trend in the future: the creation of organizations with an explicitly racial agenda. These organizations, similar to those that existed in Cuba in the past, will be able to draw resources from a transnational network of non-governmental organizations and agencies that did not exist before. Such efforts will likely be led by members of the expanded black middle class, the same young professionals, intellectuals, and artists who have begun to voice their critique of Cuba’s racial democracy through cultural means. Indeed, young artists frequently call for unity and mobilization, to give “continuity to the Afro struggle,” as *Hermanos de Causa* tell us. *Somos guerreras... somos más que un movimiento* (“we are female warriors... we are more than a movement”), assert *Las Krudas*. These fighters, this movement, are part of the complex legacies of the Cuban revolution and will be part of Cuba’s future.