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A Revolution Deferred: Racism in Cuba

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A Revolution Deferred

Racism in Cuba

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Ron Jones
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A common misconception or a glaring example of American Exceptionalism is that the majority of African slaves were sent to the United States. In fact, lest than 10% were sent to the United States.\textsuperscript{1} The rest were sent throughout the Americas and the rest of the world. Today millions of their descendants reside all over Latin America. Although their languages, cuisines, dress, etc. vary throughout the region, they share more than a common ancestry. They all suffer from the scars of oppression that no governmental policy or reconciliation strategy has been able to heal.

From Affirmative Action to calls for monetary reparations, there has been a constant struggle to properly compensate the descendants of African slaves. Cuba is no different. There are millions of Afro-Cubans. And one could argue that Cuba went further than any policy for racial equality.. Cuba sought equality for all via a complete governmental overhaul, opting for socialism. A utopian society in which race determines nothing by melanin amounts. But Cuba failed to achieve to racial equality. As all of the countries strive for an in ending in equality, the beginnings were all the same.

Slavery in Cuba

Beginning in the 17th century, over eight hundred thousand African slaves arrived in Cuba. This is a conservative estimate still almost doubles the amount of slaves that arrived in the US.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time Period</th>
<th>US &amp; Canada</th>
<th>Cuba</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1501-1600</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1601-1700</td>
<td>19,956</td>
<td>434</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1701-1800</td>
<td>358,845</td>
<td>78,585</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1801-1866</td>
<td>93,581</td>
<td>810,971</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Totals</strong></td>
<td><strong>472,381</strong></td>
<td><strong>889,990</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

After the Haitian Revolution in 1804 many western nations began to look elsewhere for sugar. It opened up a market for Cuban sugar, and thus more slaves were needed. Upon arrival they took on the form of property and had no rights. They were sent to the rural areas of the island in order to provide labor on the plantations. The slaves predominantly worked on sugar and tobacco farms. The labor was tedious, the weather was hot, and the living conditions were inhumane. Many slaves attempted escape. In 1880, seventeen years after the Emancipation Proclamation, Spain approved an abolition law in Cuba,

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“patronato.” The law gradually freed slaves with complete abolition achieved in 1886 by royal decree.

The Negro Rebellion

But just as in America, emancipation did not equal equality. Former slaves were discriminated against by businesses and in employment. Black children were not allowed to attend school. All of the issues that accompany slavery were very prevalent.

- In 1887, only 11% of Afro-Cubans of all ages could read and write (compared with 33% of whites).
- Spanish officials regularly removed the Don and Doña titles from official documents and identity cards issued to Afro-Cubans. In 1893 these titles were returned, according to an article in La Igualdad on December 16, 1893.
- Afro-Cubans were excluded from seats in theatres (except in the gallery), and many hotels and restaurants refused them service.
- The Union of railroad drivers banned Afro-Cubans from the profession altogether, and many job ads specified a race requirement.
- Official government and cultural influence promoted the racial fears that existed in white society to lock out blacks from society.4

In spite of the discrimination, Afro-Cubans were influential in the Cuban War for Independence. They participated in large numbers and held leadership positions.

General Antonio Maceo Grajeles, second in command during the war, was an Afro-Cuban. Grajeles is still viewed by many Cubans as a national hero. Moreover, an estimated 82,000 Afro-Cubans dies during the war, compared to 26,000 Whites. Unfortunately, independence from Spain did not equal equality for Afro-Cubans.

After the war, American influence increased in Cuba. The US assisted Cuba in its war for independence and maintained significant control over the country after the war concluded. The Platt Amendment, signed in 1902, gave America significant control over various aspects of Cuba. Military governors dictated policies and laws on the island. Along with the amendment, America infused its segregationist culture into Cuba as well.

In 1901, military leader Leonard Wood decided to “Whiten Cuba.” In addition to expanded and enforcing segregation in a myriad of ways, Wood went as far as to exhume the body of Antonio Maceo in order to analyze his racial makeup. Afro-Cubans, many of whom had fought and given their lives for independence, did not take this mistreatment sitting down.

Afro-Cubans, Evaristo Estenoz and Gregorio Surin co-founded the "Agrupación Independiente de Color" in 1908. Later the name of the organization would be switched to the Partido Independente de Color.” The organization’s mission was to improve the lives of Afro-Cubans. In the spring of 1912, the organization led a

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6 Black in Latin America. PBS Distribution, 2011. Film.
rebellion against the Cuban government. The US assisted the Cuban government in their quashing of the rebellion which lasted only a couple of months. Although the rebellion was quashed, the Americas were on notice that Afro-Cubans sought a better life. And with the Haitian Revolution a little over a century, the Americas took notice. But the rebellion did little to effectuate change in the daily discrimination and mistreatment that Afro-Cubans suffered.

**Pre-Revolution Cuba**

Between 1912 and the Revolution of 1959, most native Cubans felt discriminated against in their own country. As American influence continued to increase so did inequality. Wealth was concentrated amongst a few Cubans or simply in the control of US interests. According to The Smithsonian Institute, by the late 1950s US financial interests controlled 90 percent of Cuban Mines, 80 percent of its public utilities, 50 percent of its railways, 40 percent of its sugar production, and 25 percent of its bank deposits. Little of this wealth was shared with Afro-Cubans, but they did work on the sugar plantations and in the mine for meager wages. Illiteracy, hunger, and abject poverty were rampant in Cuba, especially amongst the Afro-Cubans. So they embraced Castro’s Revolution. And Castro embraced them.

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"In all fairness, I must say that it is not only the aristocracy who practice discrimination. There are very humble people who also discriminate. There are workers who hold the same prejudices as any wealthy person, and this is what is most absurd and sad ... and should compel people to meditate on the problem. Why do we not tackle this problem radically and with love, not in a spirit of division and hate? Why not educate and destroy the prejudice of centuries, the prejudice handed down to us from such an odious institution as slavery? The blood of Africa runs deep in our veins. People's mentality is not yet revolutionary enough. People's mentality is still conditioned by many prejudices and beliefs from the past ... One of the battles which we must prioritize more and more every day ... is the battle to end racial discrimination at the work place ... There are two types of racial discrimination: one is the discrimination on the recreation centers or cultural centers; the other, which is the worst and the first one which we must fight, is racial discrimination in the job...We shouldn't have to pass a law to establish a right that should belong to every human being and member of society ... Nobody can consider themselves to be of pure race, much less a superior race. Virtue, personal merit, heroism, generosity, should be the measure of men, not skin color...What the eternal enemies of Cuba and the enemies of this revolution want is for us to be divided into a thousand pieces, thereby to be able to destroy us."  

Fidel Castro, March 21, 1959

The only rival to the fiery rhetoric of Fidel Castro’s speeches were their length. Castro’s guerrilla overtook then President Batista’s forces in January, 1959. By March he was publicly denouncing racism in his country. The following year he was visited by Black Nationalist Malcom X. Castro’s support from Afro-Cubans made sense. Prior to the revolution they were at the bottom of the totem pole.

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They comprised a significant percentage of Cuba’s lower classes. So this revolution purported to benefit them more than most other groups.

And Afro-Cubans did benefit from Castro’s policies. As with the rest of Cuba, they were largely illiterate. Cuba’s literacy rates skyrocketed. They disproportionately suffered from malnourishment prior to the Castro’s Regime. Afro-Cubans now had access to universal health care. Castro outlawed discrimination in employment and education, several years before the passage of the Civil Rights Act. The Special Period after the Revolution provided several benefits to Afro-Cubans in terms of health, wealth, and education. But these improvements did not amount to equality and definitely did not alleviate de facto racism in Cuba.

While Afro-Cubans did receive better accommodations, these were not fair or equal accommodations. They were still relegated to the slums of Havana or poorer quality rural housing. Their participation in government increased but never equaled that of White Cubans. Afro-Cubans entered university at higher rates but not equal rates. And thus their position in the labor market was still disproportionally relegated to the more menial tasks.

While Castro did effectively obliterate institutional racism, he did not address prevailing racial attitudes. As Martin Luther King Jr. pondered the usefulness of being able to sit down for a hamburger without the money to pay for it, Castro
decided to give the burger away to everyone yet he did not address if there were consumed together in harmony. These attitudes continue to plague Cuba.

The End of the Honeymoon

In 1991, the Soviet Union collapsed. As western democracy cheered, socialism around the world was dealt an impactful blow. Its largest and most staunch supporter had failed. Few countries were affected as much as Cuba. Although situated across the globe from the old Soviet Union, their greatest ally was the Soviet Union. The USSR actively traded and supported Cuba in a myriad of ways financially. When the Soviet Union collapsed so did Cuba.

The USSR contributed billions to the Cuban economy annually. Cuba lost 80% of its imports and exports.\(^9\) Without the support Cuba went into the darkest times of the Castro Regime. Resources became scarce. Oil and other essential items were no longer available overnight. Petroleum imports dropped to below 10% of their levels prior to the collapse.\(^10\) And gross domestic product decreased by 34%.\(^11\) Cuba faced rolling blackouts. Public transportation was all but demolished. The economic crisis forced many into starvation due to a food


shortage. A lot of fertilizers were petroleum-based. The US doubled down on its embargo efforts by signing the Helms-Burton Act. In order to address the economic problems of the Special Period, Fidel & Raul decided to open up Cuba’s economy and allow more private investment and ownership.

**Widening the Gap**

In the early 21st century Cuba embarked on economic reforms. After being forced to fulfil the void left by the collapse of the Soviet Union Cuba opened up its economy. Western businesses were now encouraged to invest. Private citizens were allowed to own and operate certain businesses such as restaurants or “paladars.” Remittances from Cuban relatives in the United States increased. After medicine and tourism, remittances became their third largest source of income.\(^{12}\)

While these gains have been great for Cuba, they have not been shared anything near equally amongst the population. Most remittances are dependent on having a relative in the financial position to send money or resources. Several Cubans have relatives that left for the United States after the regime change. It was in essence a brain-drain as the then Cuban Elite were having their property confiscated by the government. Those Cuban Elites were disproportionately White due to a long history of structural racism. And now that send remittances back to

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their White relatives in Cuba. The medicine industry is also disproportionately White due to disparities in higher education between Black and White Cubans.\textsuperscript{13} Tourism is also dominated by White Cubans for a variety of reasons. It could be adversely affected if Cuba was viewed as a predominantly Black country. While there are stark differences, Haiti embraces its African heritage and ancestry but is not a highly sought after tourist destination. Several publications claim that Afro-Cubans are (illegally) kept out of many tourist positions. In addition to tourism being a very lucrative occupation in Cuba. Thus it is highly sought after. And Afro-Cubans do not have the connections or education to challenge White Cubans for these highly competitive positions.

**The Two Cubas Today**

These remittances and higher paying jobs are giving White Cubans an upper hand as the economy continues to grow. Roberto Zurbano, writing for the New York Times opines,

It’s true that Cubans still have a strong safety net: most do not pay rent, and education and health care are free. But the economic divergence created two contrasting realities that persist today. The first is that of white Cubans, who have leveraged their resources to enter the new market-driven economy and reap the benefits of a

\textsuperscript{13} Dr Esteban Morales Domínguez, Desafíos de la problemática racial en Cuba (The Challenges of the Racial Problem in Cuba). La Habana: Fundación Fernando Ortiz, 2007
supposedly more open socialism. The other reality is that of the black plurality, which witnessed the demise of the socialist utopia from the island’s least comfortable quarters.

Most remittances from abroad — mainly the Miami area, the nerve center of the mostly white exile community — go to white Cubans. They tend to live in more upscale houses, which can easily be converted into restaurants or bed-and-breakfasts — the most common kind of private business in Cuba. Black Cubans have less property and money, and also have to contend with pervasive racism. Not long ago it was common for hotel managers, for example, to hire only white staff members, so as not to offend the supposed sensibilities of their European clientele.¹⁴

The majority of Afro-Cubans lead a different life than their White countrymen. They are far behind in every facet of life. Education, wealth, and health gaps between the races are persistent and widening. The ramifications of the disparities are familiarly saddening. The lower socio-economic standing has increased incarceration of Afro-Cubans. There seems to be a perception of disdain and prejudiced from White Cubans towards Black Cubans. Although I don’t have quantitative or qualitative data, one must wonder mental effects of lower-class status have on the Afro-Cubans. Dr. Estaban Morales’ research puts contemporary Cuba for Afro-Cubans in proper perspective.

- Black population recorded growing impoverishments over the past 25 years;

• Cuba’s total civil and public leadership is predominantly white (71%), despite a Black population of somewhere between 62-72%:

• 72.7% of scientists and technicians are white; 80% of the professors at the University of Havana are white, and that average is pretty much stable throughout the country;

• Privately owned land is 98% white; only 2% of the private sector in land is in the hands of Blacks;

• Blacks have only 5% interests in State cooperatives and with growing privatizing of land, they will be totally disenfranchised;

• In 2005, 65.8% of able-bodied Black Cubans were unemployed, whereas employment of Whites exceeded 70%;

• In 2009, 70% of Cuban Blacks were estimated to be unemployed;

• The skyrocketing unemployment of Blacks has led to increased “black market” and other criminal activities, resulting in a prison population that is now estimated to be 85% Black, averaging in age between 18 – 28 years;

• 68% of white Cubans declared strong opposition to inter-racial marriage, and 58% said Blacks were “less intelligent than whites”, according to the 2005 survey.

• Blacks overwhelmingly (60.8%) blamed "racial discrimination" in hiring and promotion for these stark contrasts, while an overwhelming majority of Cubans of both races agreed that "racial prejudice continues to be current on the island" (75%).15

Conclusion

Indicative of prevailing racial attitudes, the racial demographics of Cuba vary wildly depending on who is asked. According to Cuban Census Data, 65% of Cuba

15 Dr Esteban Morales Domínguez, Desafíos de la problemática racial en Cuba (The Challenges of the Racial Problem in Cuba). La Habana: Fundación Fernando Ortiz, 2007
is White. That number is highly contested. Other publications put the White percentage as low as 37%. If the Cuban census is correct then a very large demographical shift had to have occurred recently. That is very unlikely. Either a disproportionate number of Cubans are denying their heritage or the Cuban government is fudging their demographics. Both situations are very disheartening.

In spite of growing disparities in wealth on the basis of race, Cuba has an opportunity. The transition into a more market-based economy is far from over. Real estate markets are the infant stages of development. Diplomatic relations with the US are being re-established. As the Cuban economy grows, the growth can be implemented in a way that is far and just to Afro-Cubans. Cuba’s goals of equality do not have to be cast away during this exciting transitional period. If Cuba fails to implement economic growth in a way that is beneficial to all of its residents then it has failed. It failed by Cuban standards. Failed to live up to the principles that led to the Revolution. Because a large, by many accounts the largest, group in the country has been denied full economic freedom and privileges. Afro-Cubans will have been denied true participation in the Revolution. Cuba must ask itself one essential question. Is a Revolution deferred, a revolution at all?