

From Structural

Afro-Cubans & Afro-Caribbeans in the 1990s

I first visited Cuba in 1984. Around the world, it was a time of Orwellian anxiety, but in Cuba there appeared to be a general feeling of security about the revolution and its future. Thirteen years later, I returned to a different Cuba. Politically, economically, and socio-culturally, much had changed.

Throughout the world, we have witnessed the transformation of race relations as the direct consequence of revolutions, political movements, wars of independence, and migrations. The Cuban Revolution, for example, is credited with significant improvements in the quality of race relations in that society. During my visit to Cuba in 1997, I sought to explore whether any noticeable reversal in race relations had accompanied the present period of economic crisis. More precisely, I wanted to know whether the policy of "racial democracy" would deteriorate in the wake of what some consider the revolution's darkest hour. This essay is a reflection on the two Cubas I met. Specifically, it is a critique of the draconian economic change that resulted from the "Special Period" and its impact upon Afro-Cubans' views of race relations now and in the future.

In the past, most people discussed Cuba in isolation from its neighbors. To a great ex-

tent, this was because of the island's political ties to the Soviets and the U.S. embargo, which significantly reduced trade between Cuba and its neighbors in the Caribbean Community and Common Market (CARICOM). However, Cuba managed to reach out to its neighbors in other ways. Medical students in Jamaica and Grenada, for example, studied in Cuba's medical schools. The progressive Jamaican government under Michael Manley and Grenada after its revolution in 1979 received ideological support from the Cubans. Due to such ties, I believe we should view Cuba in the context of the larger Caribbean region. But contextualizing Cuba in the region is important for yet another reason. Cuba's current economic crisis corresponds to the experience of many of its closest neighbors, certainly since the major international recession of the 1980s and the imposition of structural adjustment programs (SAPs). This essay will discuss the extent to which their common crises might forge a rapprochement between Cuba and its anglophone Afro-Caribbean neighbors and the potential such an alliance might offer for furthering the discourse on race relations in contemporary Cuba. Such a rapprochement could lead to competition among states in

Adjustment Programs to Special Period

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search of the best trade agreements with Cuba. It is also possible that business elites from the neighboring states might come to view an alliance with Cuba strictly as an opportunity to flex their entrepreneurial muscles and amass new capital. One hopes, though, that this relationship will lead to a progressive realignment of the region's economy and to an improvement in the quality of life for all of its people.

During my 1984 and 1997 visits to Cuba, I conducted informal interviews with Afro-Cuban and mestizo male and female youth between the ages of sixteen and twenty-one. Youth seemed to me an appropriate cohort to focus on, since the future of any society rests with its youth. Both of my visits were official in nature, with the majority of time devoted to site visits, seminars, and meetings with government officials. This, needless to say, forced me to settle for impromptu interviews with individuals and small groups of youth wherever and whenever the opportunity arose.

1984

In 1984, I observed among the Cuban people a feeling of national pride to a degree that I

had not encountered elsewhere in the region. Civility and order best characterized the society at that time. I recall my arrival and the bus ride from José Martí International Airport to the Rivera Hotel, where my delegation stayed. The time was about one o'clock in the morning. As I gazed out the bus window, I could see average men and women waiting at the various bus stops, either returning from work or en route to work. They appeared relaxed and undaunted by the darkness and the stillness of the early morning hour. A similar scene, remarked a colleague seated next to me, would be difficult to find in urban America. As I maneuvered about the streets of Havana by day and at odd hours of the evening, I came to experience these same feelings of security and ease. Sociologist Elijah Anderson was correct when he noted in *Streetwise* that body language and other nonverbal behavior convey a great deal about people, about their feelings of safety and insecurity, and about their identities.

Interviews with young people at that time corroborated the view that they were optimistic about the future and confident that the revolution had been fought for them. I saw many groups of young pioneers—tomorrow's revolutionaries—clad in their traditional

white shirts and red scarves, traveling to and from school around Havana and Matanzas, the two districts we visited. It was also difficult to miss the huge prorevolution billboards throughout Havana and Matanzas bearing messages that reinforced the values of strong family life, healthy living, and education. Despite scarcities and rationing, the Soviet Union's hefty subsidies enabled the Cuban economy at this point to remain solvent.

There was some discontent amid the hope of 1984. My initial hint of this occurred one afternoon as members of my delegation and I watched Afro-Cuban youth "break dancing" along one of old Havana's street corners. Break dancing was a popular cultural form among inner-city black and Latino youth in the United States at the time. Several young people approached us with their eyes fastened to our footwear. They craved Florsheim shoes, stating that the only shoes available to them were undesirable because they were not stylish. We later learned that Cuba imported most of its shoes from Russia and Eastern Europe. Shoes just happened to be one item. We discovered that the Cubans were just as eager for other imports such as appliances and electronic goods.

Members of the 1984 delegation consistently raised the issue of racial inequality on the island during our various meetings with officials. Afro-Cubans, we noticed, were nearly invisible in major positions in the official party and government structure. We also saw that few Afro-Cubans served in high positions at the Lenin School or the major medical facility in Havana. Officials from most ministries flatly denied evidence of racial discontent in the country. For that matter, they

also denied a weakening of commitment on the part of the state to its system of racial democracy.

Elsewhere in the Caribbean at that historical juncture, the ravages of international recession had already set in. By then, most CARICOM nations were either in the process of making formal applications to the International Monetary

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Fund (IMF) and the World Bank for loans or were in the throes of structural adjustment programs. Susan George's seminal work, *A Fate Worse Than Debt*, uncovers some of the grueling facts behind structural adjustment programs around the world. Joe Lugalla's 1995 paper entitled "The Impact of Structural Adjustment Policies on Women's and Children's Health in Tanzania" captures a similar discussion. Both writers agree that SAPs are designed primarily to manage balance of payments, reduce fiscal deficits, increase efficiency, and encourage private sector investments and export-oriented production. In the service of these aims, SAPs regularly devalue local currency and force reductions in public borrowing and government expenditure, particularly in the social sectors. Other measures include tariff reductions, abolition of price controls, privatization of public parastatals, and, of course, the reduction of the public work force.

The introduction of SAPs is linked to sociocultural disruption and decline. These conditions include family disruption, unemployment, illicit drug trafficking, increased rural-urban migration, and pressure to emigrate. Young people are extremely vulnerable; high unemployment and limited options greet those who leave school. Many of these small-island, single-cash-crop economies

rely heavily upon tourism as their main revenue source. By the World Bank's own admission, the poverty index for the region is high. The electronic media, in the form of satellite television and cable services, transport various forms of mass culture from abroad (mainly the United States). This only serves to exacerbate the problem, as victims, bombarded with visions of material goods, are denied the means to acquire those goods. Needless to say, this contradiction continues to fuel the urban crime rate in many of these countries.

With the termination of Soviet subsidies in 1991, Washington calculated that the mortally wounded Castro government was near its deathbed. With that, the United States escalated the economic embargo and, shortly thereafter, passed the Helms-Burton legislation. This sent the Cuban economy into shock. The period of drastic social and economic restructuring commonly known as the Special Period had arrived.

1997

Paradoxically, the U.S. policy, intended to further isolate Cuba, appears to be backfiring. The Cuban state continues to win the sympathy of U.S. allies (most notably Canada and Europe) and to draw closer to its regional neighbors. Just prior to the passage of Helms-

Burton in 1996, CARICOM member states and Canadian high officials at their summit meeting in St. George's, Grenada, issued a joint statement to President Clinton denouncing the proposed legislation. *Caribbean Week* reported that Sir James Mitchell, prime minister of St. Vincent and the Grenadines, released the following statement at the summit meeting: "We speak in consonance with the Canadian government on the issue. The rest of the hemisphere is not supporting the U.S. action." At the Bridgetown, Barbados, meetings in May 1997, President Clinton met with the heads of CARICOM states. Jamaican prime minister P. J. Patterson and others were surprisingly outspoken in reaffirming their commitment to work with Cuba, claiming Cuba as an integral neighbor in the region. In mid-June 1997, the prime minister of St. Vincent and the Grenadines made an official five-day visit to Cuba to discuss trade and other subjects of mutual importance. Special Period and structural adjustment programs will, I believe, continue to draw Cuba and its non-Hispanic Caribbean neighbors into a closer working relationship. This relationship will create economic benefits for the entire region, and at the same time, it will help to further the discourse on race and racial identity in Cuba.

The Special Period has forced the Cuban state to chart a new economic course:

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tourism. The government has pursued this development mainly through joint ventures between the Cuban government and various European countries and investors. In June 1997, critical signs of this new economic survival strategy were inescapable, with the construction of new hotels and other tourist attractions dotting the Cuban landscape. The five-star hotel where I lodged testified to the government's commitment to develop a world-class tourist in-

dustry with amenities and architectural design rivaling the best in the world. As in other island states where tourism has had a head start, prostitution surrounds the Cuban hotels. Interestingly, most of the prostitutes that I saw were black, although Afro-Cubans make up a small percentage of Havana's population. Compared to 1984, the number of young pioneers seemed to have declined. A disturbing spectacle not observed in 1984 was small groups of youth—usually in the vicinity of the hotels and tourist transport buses and at the outdoor craft markets—begging for small change. Once again, these youths were blacks and mestizos. A final observation was that the number of prorevolution billboards had declined.

My 1997 interviews with male and female youth in 1997 were conducted in Havana and Santiago de Cuba. In all, I met informally with about fifteen young people at various times individually and in small groups. They were primarily Afro-Cubans, with a small number of mestizos. Some were students at the University of Havana; a few were medical students. Others were young people I met on a visit to a neighborhood cultural center in

Havana and at a Committee for Defense of the Revolution gathering in Santiago de Cuba. I also had the opportunity to interview a few young people whom I met during lunch

at a Havana *palidor*, located in a ninth-floor flat in a high-rise building just steps away from my hotel. A recent development in Cuba, *palidors* form part of the growing informal economy in which residents of private households serve hot meals to guests at reasonable rates. The interviews

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centered on their identity as Cubans, their loyalty to the revolution, and the matter of racial identity. On the issue of race, little had changed. Black Cubans continued to identify themselves as Cubans, seeing little if any evidence of difference between themselves and nonblack youth. As one youth responded, "Black youth hang out with other blacks simply because we happen to live in the same project or because we know each other. But we have many mestizo and white friends, too." One youth who was apparently uneasy with my questions about race remarked rather caustically: "The condition of race relations in the United States is entirely different than in Cuba. There is no room for comparison."

None of the interviewees believed that the Special Period was causing a breakdown in race relations. On the other hand, in response to my question about the influence of foreign mass culture and the increased tourism, all agreed that the increased crime rate, violence, and prostitution on the island were direct consequences. However, they denied that drugs were a problem. Most of these young people mentioned that they are interested in the action at the hotels: salsa nights, listening

to pop and rap music from abroad. (It should be pointed out that the government tightly controls the television programming in Cuban households; the tourist hotels, by contrast, have unlimited access to cable and satellite services.) The youth do not have the money to attend most events at the hotels or to afford designer apparel from abroad. According to them, some young people have relatives in the States who send these items to them. Frequently, however, that creates some envy and class antagonism between the haves and have-nots.

Although parallels between SAPs and the Special Period exist, there are also many differences. Whereas the Special Period in Cuba was an internal response to an externally triggered economic crisis, SAPs are wholly imposed from without. Not to be overlooked is the revolutionary history of the Cuban people and the ways in which that history operates to ensure a collective response to the restructuring process.

The implications of the coincidence of SAPs in the region and the Special Period in Cuba should give us renewed hope for the development of the Caribbean as a whole. Throughout the region, the Cuban people are respected for their history of struggle and resistance as well as their nationalistic commitment. Yet many Caribbean countries have viewed Cuba as a foreign land. But it appears that the small island nations in the region are awakening to the contradictions in the U.S. Cuban policy, especially the contrast between Cuban policy and recent U.S. normalization efforts with the governments of Vietnam and North Korea. Probably the most conspicuous of these normalization efforts is China, which, despite charges of human rights viola-

tions, continues to enjoy Most Favored Nation status.

Caribbean countries are also realizing that their destinies rest in their own hands and that their ability to forge strong economic and cultural ties is the only way for the future. This realization has inspired CARICOM member states to risk the possibility of U.S. reprisals and lobby for Cuba's membership in that economic community. In 1995, the Association of Caribbean States (ACS), the most recent pan-Caribbean organization, invited Cuba to join. Fidel Castro delivered the inaugural address.

Through closer economic and diplomatic ties, the prospects for increasing interchange between the anglophone Caribbean and Cuba—whether in the form of resident, tourist, or student exchange—will also improve. Currently, a small number of anglophone West Indians visit Cuba each year, and likewise, the Cuban presence in neighboring island states is marginal. An increase in the number of foreign blacks in Cuba would inevitably lead to a heightening of the discourse on race as these black newcomers begin to raise questions and stimulate new thinking. Many Afro-Cubans descend from anglophone West Indians who immigrated mainly to Oriente Province from Jamaica, Barbados, Trinidad and Tobago, and elsewhere during the 1920s as labor migrants. These ethnocultural connections may serve to weaken the existing barriers while strengthening the prospects for a meaningful racial discourse.

It is uncertain which direction Cuba is headed. Given the recent turn of events, however, it is quite possible that Cubans and Afro-Cubans will discover the future in their own backyard.