

# Commentary on Race and Revolution in Cuba

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I write this commentary with some trepidation, for I am truly an outsider to the distinguished group of African-American scholars writing here. I am not African American, nor did I participate in their visit to Cuba or the subsequent conference at Columbia University. However, I have made numerous trips to Cuba since 1977 and have done research on Cuban women textile workers with the Cuban Federation of Women, which was published in my book, *The Myth of the Male Breadwinner: Women and Industrialization in the Caribbean* (Westview Press, 1995). I also edited and wrote an introduction to a special issue of *Latin American Perspectives* (May 1998) on race and national identity in the Americas, in which I explain the difference between the bipolar construction of race in the U.S. and *mestizaje*, or race mixture, in Latin America and the Caribbean. That analysis informs much of my comments here.

An understanding of the difference in the social construction of race in the two regions is critical to an analysis of race and revolution

in Cuba. This is especially true for African Americans, who, as James Early notes, focus on racial equality in their evaluation of the Cuban revolution. Yet, as Lisa Brock also notes, African Americans expect Cubans to see race exactly as they do, and the difference in the social construction of race in the United States and Cuba and other areas of Latin America is often not recognized.

The bipolar contrast between black and white in the United States is based on a rule of hypo-descent, which made race a fundamental division in society and encouraged the formation of a separate racial identity that is often lacking in Latin America and the Caribbean. Like most of the writers here, African Americans view the lack of a distinct racial consciousness among Afro-Cubans as a denial of racial pride because, as Early notes, race is subsumed into national identity. That is, especially since the 1920s, Afro-Cuban cultural and biological roots are assumed to be an essential part of *cubanía*, or Cubanness, so that even the term "Afro-Cuban," as sev-

*Elderly Cuban woman reflecting. Photo by Chester Higgins Jr.*



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eral here observed, is deemed to be tautological. A popular Cuban slogan cited by Assata Shakur<sup>1</sup> says: "*El que no tiene de Congo tiene de Carabali*" (those who have no Congo blood have Carabali), affirming the African roots of all Cubans.

The term "Afro-Cuban," although increasingly accepted in Cuba, suggests a racial division of society that for Cubans is at best meaningless and at worst threatening to the unity of a society that has had to struggle against tremendous odds to achieve national sovereignty. Cuba labored under Spanish colonialism until 1898, only to see its sovereignty sharply curtailed by the United States under the Platt Amendment. Now Cuba has been under siege from the United States since the socialist revolution took place in 1959. The degree to which Afro-Cubans identified with their country can be seen in the important role they played in the bitter and bloody Cuban wars of independence from Spain in the late nineteenth century, under the leadership of the highly regarded Afro-Cuban general, Antonio Maceo. Their participation helps explain why Cuba was the only country in the Americas to grant black men universal suffrage after independence. However, when

Afro-Cubans tried to form their own political party in 1912, they were brutally repressed.

Political mobilization by Afro-Cubans was always discouraged and is not new with the revolution. Afro-Cubans were accepted as part of the polity so long as they acknowledged the hegemony of Cuban national culture based on *mestizaje* and posed no challenge to its superiority. In the prerevolutionary period, the Cuban state maintained an official silence on race issues, while racial discrimination and racial stereotypes abounded. At the same time, *mestizaje* attempted to incorporate oppositional elements, not only through race mixture but through cultural reinterpretations, while in the United States, African-American cultural roots were largely excluded and ignored (as in jazz and other forms of black music). Both *mestizaje* and the bipolar system of racial construction in the United States are based on white superiority, but the former relied on inclusion and co-optation and the latter on dominance and exclusion—at least until the civil rights movement attempted to reintegrate African Americans into U.S. society (Omi and Winant 1986). In both the United States and Latin America

and the Caribbean, whiteness was identified with progress and modernity, while blackness was associated with backwardness and inferiority. Both countries promoted white immigration to "modernize" their populations, though Cuba was much less successful than the United States. As an alternative, Cuba turned to a process of *blanqueamiento*, or whitening, through which Afro-Cubans would be biologically and culturally assimilated by intermarriage with whites and the adoption of white European norms and values, which again reinforced racial hierarchies. Extensive racial intermarriage in Cuba and elsewhere in Latin America contributed to the formation of a racial continuum based on phenotype that made it difficult to isolate a bounded, recognized Afro-American (or indigenous) group and inhibited the development of a separate cultural identity. Instead, the intermediate mulatto stratum

produced by race mixture came to be not only recognized but glorified in Cuba as a national symbol. This contrasts vividly with the negative view of race mixture in the United States, which the recent consternation regarding Thomas Jefferson's sexual relationship with his slave Sally Hemmings has revived. The damage to Jefferson's reputation as a founding father seems to stem less from the illicit nature of the relationship, or Hemming's young age and slave status, than from her race and his fathering a biracial child (or several). In a bipolar racial

construction, hybridity violates the lines of racial purity, while under *mestizaje* it is celebrated.

The Cuban revolution largely ignored the ideological elements of white superiority implicit in *mestizaje* and focused instead on the structural dimensions of racial inequality, which included exclusion from elite schools, beaches, and social clubs, as well as widely disparate levels of education, health, income, and other indices of well-being. Race, like gender, was treated in Marxist terms as a fun-

damentally class issue, which could be addressed by redistributive programs such as free education and health care and by promoting occupational mobility and an end to residential segregation. As Alejandro de la Fuente (1995) systematically documents, Afro-Cubans made impressive gains, reducing racial differences

in life expectancy, infant mortality, educational levels, and occupational attainments. I do not agree with Clarence Lusane, who views this effort as reducing "racism to the realm of market relations" because redistribution and the reduction of class differences made a huge difference in the lifestyles and well-being of many Afro-Cubans (as well as poor whites). The revolution eliminated all traces of institutional racism in Cuba, but it did not address the ideological aspects of *mestizaje*, with its implicit acceptance of white superiority. Whites have continued to

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be privileged for top-level positions in the government and in the Communist Party, though starting in 1986, the party made a concerted effort to address the problem. More revealing at the popular level is the continuing persistence of racial endogamy in Cuba, especially among whites, 93 percent of whom in 1981 chose other whites as marriage partners (Reca et al. 1990). Parents object to the increase in interracial dating taking place among Cuban youth, presumably resulting from the changed racial ideology of the revolution as well as from reduced racial segregation in schools and neighborhoods (Fernandez 1996). The revolution succeeded in opening new avenues of social mobility for Afro-Cubans and in promoting Afro-Cuban culture in music and dance, but it did not eliminate the ideological notion of white superiority.

This contradiction confounds African Americans, especially now that racial equality has become a more salient issue in the Special Period ushered in by the collapse of trade and aid from the former Soviet Union and Eastern European socialist societies. As several of the writers in this symposium note, the gains that Afro-Cubans made during the revolution are threatened by cuts in government programs and a severe shortage of food, medicine, and consumer goods, due largely to the U.S. embargo and its strengthening by

the Helms-Burton Act. Cuba has been forced to resort to a dollar economy, which again privileges whites, because they have more relatives sending remittances from abroad. Afro-Cubans have resorted to prostitution and other forms of hustling in the informal economy, and their standard of living has fallen sharply, as has that of all Cubans. As a result, Afro-Cubans have tried to emigrate as *balseiros*, or rafters, more than in previous migration flows to the United States. Although this indicates growing dissatisfaction with socialism and the Cuban state, Afro-Cuban complaints are primarily economic, distinct from the political motivations that sent forth earlier, more affluent waves of primarily white Cubans.

Yet it is premature to dismiss or minimize the accomplishments of the revolution in terms of racial equality. Afro-Cuban culture continues to flourish, and its music has become one of Cuba's leading exports and tourist attractions. Afro-Cubans born before 1959 remember all too well how difficult life was under capitalism and recognize how difficult it has become for many older citizens of the former Socialist bloc today. Youth of all races are attracted to the consumer culture of the United States and would like to buy rock music and blue jeans. But as several of the writers here observed, the strongest denials of racism in Cuba came from Afro-

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Cubans themselves, despite the difficulties they are now facing.

Most important, the issue of racism and racial discrimination is being openly debated in Cuba for the first time since the revolution, both in the popular press and as a subject of empirical scholarly research in academic circles. Articles have been published that criticize stereotyped representations of Afro-Cubans in Cuban television and movies and discuss problems facing interracial couples. A special issue on race was published by *Temas*, a scholarly Cuban journal, and the Anthropology Center is currently conducting a study of racial attitudes in a racially mixed section of Havana. This indicates that the hegemonic silence that was imposed on race prior to and during the revolution is breaking, but "the full force of ideological struggle is only beginning" (Fernandez 1998).

The new debate on race also indicates that *mestizaje* is not as strong a deterrent to racial consciousness as was once thought (Wade 1995). The debate shows that the state-imposed silence on race is relaxing, or is being challenged, perhaps partly in response to growing racial, gender, and class inequality. Whether racial inequality and white superiority can be more successfully challenged through racial politicization and polarization, as occurred in the United States during the civil rights movement, or through racial inte-

gration, as Cuba attempted, remains to be seen.

## Notes

1. Somehow, Shakur interprets this slogan to denote the lack of mixing in Cuban national character, when its meaning is just the opposite.

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