

Reflections


on

On a recent trip to Cuba with a delegation of African Americans (see Editor's Essay), I thought once again that discussions between Cubans and U.S. activists about the state of race relations in Cuba are generally dissatisfying. I have traveled to Cuba numerous times since 1975. Without fail, discussions of historical and contemporary racial identity, racial organization, and political programs conclude without clear and measurable information from the Cubans that could lead to a better understanding of the revolution's achievements in overcoming the legacy of racism.

Like many of my generation who became politically active in the 1960s, I gained inspiration (and still do, although less romantically so) from the Cuban socialist project. Its goal of transforming the old capitalist, sexist, racist society into a nation of new women and men who would progress together according to individual ability and individual need sparked unqualified enthusiasm among many members of my generation. Organized support for the official Cuban ideology and political line characterized the allegiance and enduring public posture that many of us have held rather steadfastly to this day. Today, however, changed conditions in the world and inside Cuba demand more forthright

analysis and discriminating engagement, as well as support of the people, their representatives, and the aims and procedures of the Cuban revolution. Politicized ideology that emphasizes principles of national unity, national identity, national sovereignty, and self-determination but that does not explain the historical motives, failures, and actual achievements in Cuba's struggle to overcome its racist legacy offers more questions than answers.

For the purposes of this essay, I have limited my reflections to the political relationship between race and democracy in Cuba and to the relationship between race and democratic political support for Cuba in the United States. The interrelationship of these issues should be conscientiously addressed by Cuban officials, the general publics of both countries, and Cuba solidarity activists. Admittedly, personal experiences—as opposed to studied inquiry—have shaped my reflections. Over the years, many of us have made our formal ideological and political positions about the Cuban revolution and the Cuban people clear through solidarity activities and writings. In principle, I support the right of the Cuban people to determine their own form of government, economy, and internal social arrangements without interfer-



Cuba, Race, and Politics

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ence from other countries. I do so critically, not mechanically or absolutely. Despite criticisms and reservations concerning the Cuban socialist system and the operations of the governing Cuban Communist Party, I firmly believe that any future changes in the form and procedures of government should basically be determined by mediation between the Cuban people and their representatives. However, I believe that support for the principles of national sovereignty and self-determination should not be a passive act. Solidarity activists and internationalists would be remiss to ignore hard questions or recoil from frank views on race and other unfinished democratic projects. To do so would be to squander opportunities to learn from the achievements and failures of the Cuban Revolution, arguably the most organic revolutionary project of the twentieth century.

Taking on the potentially inflammatory subject of race relations in the current volatile political environment requires careful assessment and negotiation of ideological space. Our aim here, after all, is to advance rather than undermine the positive goals for which the Cuban government, Cuban citizens, and external supporters have fought so long and hard. Because the Cuban government is under constant threat from the U.S. government,

Cuban officials and solidarity activists often engage in self-censorship or confound critical inquiry about race, adopting a defensive tone and demeanor. With the U.S. government and a well-heeled, CIA-backed sector of Cuban-Americans attempting literally to starve the Cuban people and topple the government, discussion of race and racism can seem at best insignificant and inappropriate, at worst divisive and destabilizing.

Despite such legitimate concerns, a candid examination of race and racism in Cuba can only enhance our understanding of the nation's socioeconomic and political transformations. Notwithstanding the external and even internal threat of "ideological viruses" being introduced among the Cuban people and Cuban state, the avoidance of serious, ongoing examination of race relations does not contribute to solid internal ideological unity or external solidarity. Nor will "blue-sky" responses about race and the material interplay of race with quality-of-life factors (political access and participation, economic stability and advancement, cultural and racial parity, and so on) foster full, productive participation in defense of the revolution and in support of its continuing construction.

As African Americans and activists, we need to improve our engagement with those

who raise honest but difficult questions about socialist Cuba. Too often, both U.S. activists and Cuban officials respond to such questions with ideologically based answers that depict existing capitalism as totally devoid of human achievement and Cuban socialism as a living panacea limited only by the U.S. blockade. Lessons about the successes and failures of national transformations such as the Cuban Revolution are of the utmost importance in an era of global capitalist domination that threatens to erode national sovereignty and undermine progressive cultural initiatives. Lessons from one of the last remaining socialist projects to emerge from the Cold War period of Caribbean independence are especially important in understanding how to negotiate this new global era. International support for Cuba can only be strengthened by an understanding of Cuba's strategies for tackling its legacies of classism, racism, sexism, and other social schisms that inhibit full democratic participation in national life.

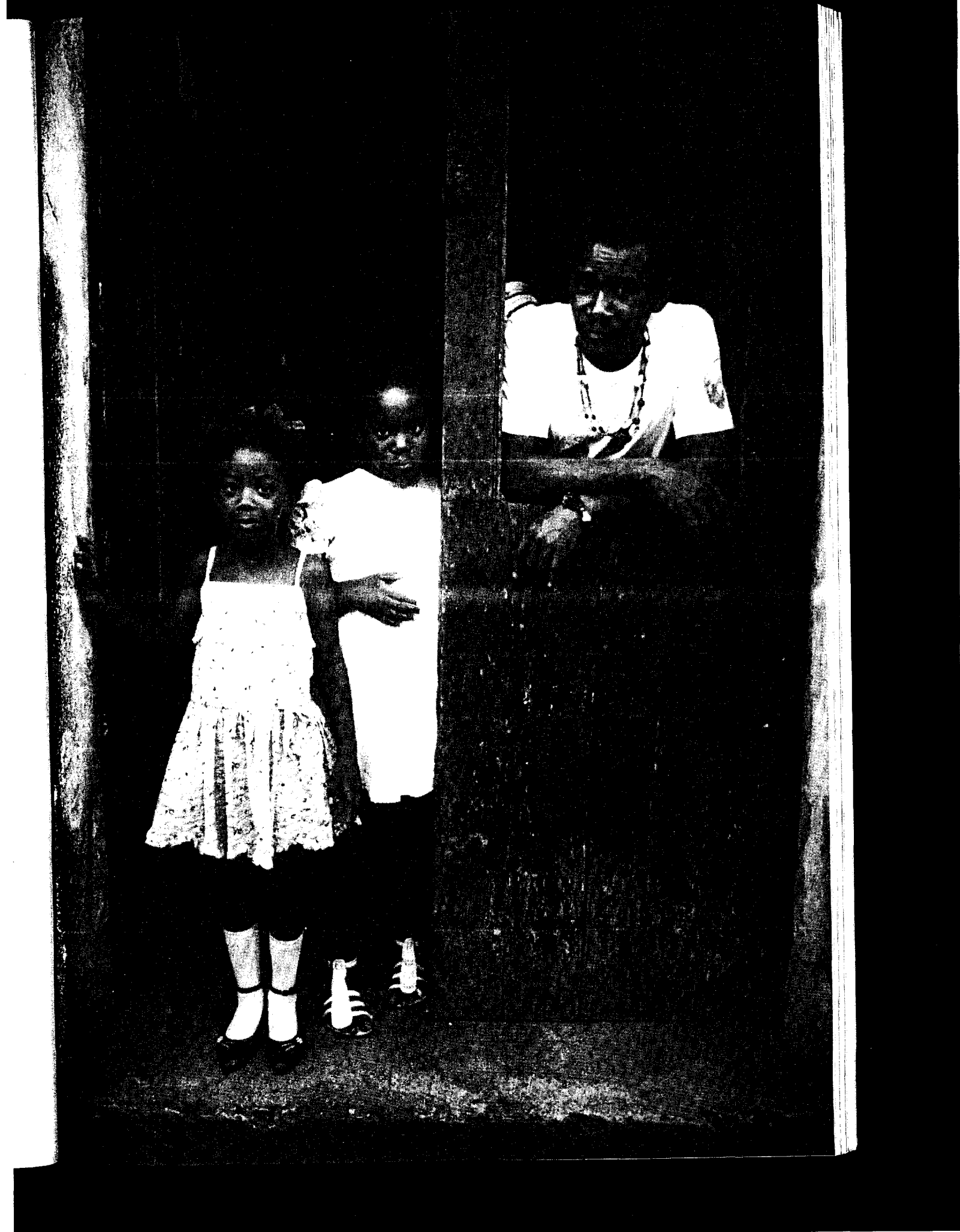
The motives for African-American interest in and actions around race relations in Cuba should be rather obvious. African-American ties to Cuba have a long and rich history. The historic U.S. African-American democratic struggle against racism (which provided, among other things, stalwart support against South African apartheid) demands an abiding interest in the quality of life of other descendants of enslaved Africans in the Americas. In addition, it entails an enduring responsibility to use the experience of the antiracist struggle in the United States to investigate and act on racism wherever it exists. Of course, African-American inquiry into the internal affairs of Cuba or any other country with respect to race relations must not assume that the issues be effectively taken up through mere replication of the U.S. experience. In addition, activists must take care to

discern whether state-sponsored and publicly organized efforts to combat racism are generally progressive and therefore deserving of external support.

In general, two subjects have galvanized the U.S. African-American community's interest in the development of the Cuban Revolution: (1) the implementation of political programs to eliminate race-based practices and to guarantee Afro-Cubans full democratic access to national life, and (2) the vibrant cultural life of the historically large Afro-Cuban population. For the most part, Cuban socialism as a philosophy and as a socioeconomic and political practice has not drawn the direct attention and interest of most African Americans in the United States. However, general awareness among African Americans about broader sociopolitical and economic developments in Cuba has extended into the margins of the more identifiable and politically grounded perspectives of solidarity and left communities. These broader interests derive from the roundly (though sometimes grudgingly) acknowledged advances in areas such as health care, education, sports, and employment.

Many African Americans outside of left and solidarity circles have deduced (correctly) that black Cubans as a group have been among the chief beneficiaries of the revolution. (Most nonactivists, however, are not aware of Cuban support for African liberation movements or of Cuba's ongoing material aid and education programs throughout the African continent.) Support for Cuba among U.S. African Americans, nonetheless, is uneven and inconsistent. It is not characteristically ideological and political with respect to socialism; rather, it focuses on racial progress and the vibrancy of Afro-Cuban culture. The inconsistency of formal focus on matters of race and the lack of well-documented studies by Cuban scholars

Matanzas, Cuba. Photo by Chester Higgins Jr.



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and the Cuban government have contributed to the lack of knowledge about race relations, as well as about the challenges faced by Afro-Cubans and their fellow citizens.

The majority of African-American congressional representatives are against the U.S. blockade of Cuba. Some black congressional representatives have voiced dismay over the relative invisibility of Afro-Cubans in high places. Congressman Charles Rangel (D-NY) has been particularly critical of both the U.S. embargo and of Cuba's relative lack of Afro-Cuban officials. For the most part, the concerns of African-American congressional representatives do not come from local electoral constituencies, nor do these members of Congress appear to be engaging their electorate on the matter. Although many Cubans presume discussions of race and race relations to be inflammatory and destabilizing, these African-American elected officials seem to be able to balance their opposition to the U.S. embargo and the Helms-Burton Act with their support for advancement of Afro-Cubans. African-American solidarity organizations and left activists have also expressed such concerns to Cuban officials stationed in the United States, emphasizing the progressive dimensions of race and heritage in building people-to-people relations. In this regard, African-American solidarity with diaspora communities should not be discounted or underestimated in Cuba's effort to establish foreign relations with the United States.

Despite a historically defined material basis to address Cuban race relations, Cuban of-

ficials and U.S. activists do not easily broach the subject of race. Unfortunately, according to many Cubans in all walks of life, race and race relations remain operative considerations in internal Cuban life. In addition, they remain operative factors in relations between the Cuban government and citizens, U.S. officials, and potential and active sympathizers and supporters in the United States—not least the U.S. African-American population. Personally, as an activist and cultural worker involved in privileged and rewarding work over the years with Cuban officials, artists, and everyday citizens, I have experienced in certain instances what I would call the negative impact of racial differentiation in treatment.

On my last two trips to Cuba, in 1993 and 1997, I was both disturbed and confounded by the unreflective and defensive assertions of most Cuban officials in response to questions about Cuban race relations. In a 1993 meeting with the distinguished revolutionary Cuban leader Juan Almeida, I, along with two seasoned African-American scholar-activists, discussed and debated issues of racial identity and race relations in Cuba. The meeting grew out of an invitation to us to explore an expansion of relations between African Americans and Cubans. Mr. Almeida was emphatic in his assertion that there is no such identity as an "Afro-Cuban," although he did acknowledge the existence of "Afro-Cuban culture in all Cubans." The nationalist premise of such a position tends to obscure, if not obliterate, any qualitative understanding of racial identity and racial progress in social-

ist Cuba. That said, nationalism itself is not the problem, especially considering that national identity in all sociocultural sectors has been the bedrock upon which the Cuban nation has built successful struggles against colonial and neocolonial opponents.

The anxiety frequently expressed by Cuban officials concerning open discussions of race in the "Special Period" does not seem to square with state support of organized efforts to overcome the legacies of discrimination against other sectors of the population. State-initiated and state-supported efforts have been concentrated on addressing the needs of previously marginalized groups and the needs of groups deemed vital for the advancement of national interests. By fostering organization and self-reflection among various social sectors (women, youth, farmers, and so on), the Cuban state works with and through these groups to develop and implement national and sectoral policies. However, the motives, nature, and scale of concerns that lead to periodic official acknowledgment, if not explanation, of the importance of Afro-Cuban advancement are unclear, and thus they remain open to speculation in and out of Cuba. The proceedings of the Fifth Party Congress in October 1997, for example, stipulate special attention for Afro-Cubans in one succinct paragraph:

In the present we must continue the consolidation of the fair policy of promoting blacks and women, especially as cadres, in the same way that has been occurring with youth, without being mechanical. This is a policy that guarantees the moral authority of the Party before our people. The Party must insist on the application of that policy in all spheres of society.

The less than clear motive and evidence for official assertions and responses about race were evident on the recent trip when a representative of a Cuban cultural organization anticipated the general interest in race relations

of the African-American delegation—which otherwise reflected diverse and sometimes divergent interests—with his introductory comments. "Black groups from the United States," he informed us, "always want to know about race in Cuba." Without direct inquiry to the delegation, he stated that "racism was eliminated by the Revolution." He offered the absence of racist laws as substantiation for the claim. The eradication of racist laws at the outset of the revolution is to be applauded. However, equating laws with institutional racism ignores the structural role of pervasive personal, cultural, and social prejudice in the construction and maintenance of inequality. But I cannot avoid thinking that eradication of racist laws in the United States has not ended institutional racism.

A Cuban representative from another state agency employed rather convoluted logic when he indicated that "affirmative action would not be a relevant tool to be applied to white Cubans to address differentials between the general adroitness demonstrated by Black Cubans in sports and music." This kind of stereotypical thinking is cause for some concern. At first, I was more embarrassed than upset by the tortured logic of his case. On later reflection, I became incensed by the implications of such a position, especially when I began to consider the negative implications for Afro-Cuban advancement. On the cultural front, another official indicated that he was hard-pressed to think of a "Black Cuban group" to participate in an upcoming Caribbean project on the African diaspora. An official of the Social Security Agency responded to a question about "racialized remittances from abroad" with the simple and unassertive comment "We have much to do."

The most convincing and reassuring perspective about race and associated problems came from a representative of the Cuban Federation of Women. She was quite impassioned in her critique of the men who controlled billboard advertisements that "as-

sociate the *sabor* [taste] of rum with scantily clad images of *mulatas*." She made note of the connections between race, color, and prostitution that some foreign tourists (Spanish men in particular) project onto darker-complexioned Cuban women. The women we spoke with were no less patriotic in their views than other men and women we met. Nor were they less concerned or fervent in defense of the revolution. However, they were not defensive, cautious, or evasive about the complex and sometimes contradictory nature of race relations in Cuba. They explained the country's advances as well as its shortcomings.

The unfinished struggle against racism in Cuba is linked with the overall challenges of socialist (re)construction in the new context of globalization, a context characterized by the infiltration destabilizing consumer culture and individualist ideology. The exportation of race-relation paradigms and racism, especially from the United States, are powerful elements of this new context. For a small country like Cuba, located a mere ninety miles from the United States, the new global context necessitates a struggle against the antinational goals of globalization and the development of progressive linkages across national boundaries. Cuba can—and must—demonstrate the viability of a national democratic working-class project, guided by socialist objectives that benefit individuals, distinct social groups, and nation-states.

Cuba is not alone in the Caribbean and Latin America in its failure to fully explore and confront matters of race. Many countries have used the touted virtue of *mestizaje*, or mixture of race and culture, to incorporate distinct groups into the nation-state. By placing the development of these groups within the abstract confines of a national identity, many countries have limited or denied the viability of self-identification, organization, and mobilization. Cuba, for

one, has conflated a detailed examination of race and consequent implications for national policy development into a discussion of national identity. A better understanding of the distinctions and linkages between the two factors is key to resolving questions of racial equity and national construction. When we strip away the historical variations in social and political constructions of race in the Americas, one glaring commonality remains: general social discrimination based on skin color.

In brief, any resolution of tensions over racial identity, race relations, and affirmative solutions requires: (1) a detailed analysis of the perspectives and practices that have guided the Cuban Revolution; (2) a critical review of past and present policies since 1959, with forthright appraisal of the revolution's successes and failures and an outline of present challenges and strategies, (3) an assessment of the problem of personal prejudice and an examination of whether or not prejudice constitutes a systemic problem; (4) an examination of the progressive and limiting roles of race in Cuba's democratic struggles; and (5) organized sharing of the practices and lessons of the Cuban Revolution.

I do not pose these tasks to satisfy the whims of Cuba's friends or foes. Rather, I present them to bring attention to a basic democratic problem increasingly raised inside of Cuba, one serious enough to warrant frank dialogue and thoughtful action. As Caribbean and Latin countries face globalization and the homogenization of national culture, they must begin to address the distinct problems of previously "invisible" groups. The growing awareness of race and racism in a changing American hemisphere demands that these nations begin to acknowledge the progressive democratic dimensions of racial identification as they face challenges of reconstruction of national identity and national development policies.