

From Black Cuban to Afro-Cuban

Researching Race in Cuba

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The blood of Africa runs deep in our veins," Fidel Castro told the Cuban people in 1966. Now, as Cuba struggles through its Special Period, many Cubans and scholars are wondering: How deep? Even in Cuba, after all, race matters. The challenge for scholars and researchers is to determine how it matters and to whom: Who is black in Cuba and who is not? If distinct racial groups exist in Cuba, can the relationship between them be characterized as racist? Can racial inequality exist even if black Cubans deny its actuality? To a significant degree, current scholarship has ignored these fundamental questions.

Scholars and activists from both the left and right have addressed the issue of race in Cuba. On the left, those who support the revolution have generally agreed with the official government view that racism has virtually disappeared from Cuban society. According to this argument, Cuban socialism and erasure of class differences eliminated the material basis for the reproduction of racism, except perhaps among certain, mostly elderly, individuals. Racism, so the argument

goes, effectively disappeared within the first postrevolution generation. Some on the far left who believe that Cuba is not truly socialist have argued that racism still exists, although they present little more than anecdotes to support their case. Leftists and progressives generally agree that overthrowing capitalism and establishing socialism is the basis for the eradication of oppressive social relations, including racism.

On the right, enemies of the revolution contend that racism may exist in Cuba, but only because the (overwhelmingly white) leadership has introduced a fictive conflict as a means to exploit and divide what was once a racism-free society. Some conservative black Cuban exiles have argued the opposite, claiming that Cuba is a deeply racist society and that the white revolutionary leadership has failed to address racial inequity. Both groups have engaged in anti-Castro activities from within the confines of the United States. Neither group presents more than undocumented tales as evidence of Cuban racism.



*Woman inside Santería shrine, along with doll representing African religious deity of Yemeyá.
Photo by Chester Higgins Jr.*

A third and more moderate position suggests that Cuba has generally eradicated institutional racism but that racism continues on other levels. This position acknowledges the positive role of socialism but criticizes Cuban leaders for being reticent about questions of racial difference. As scholar Johnnetta Cole summarizes for this argument, "Socialism is a necessary but not a sufficient condition for eradicating racism and other inequalities in a society."

I want to argue a fourth position. I would suggest that although advances against racism have occurred (through direct attacks on discrimination and a general rise in social standards), race relations remain dynamic and in constant formation in Cuba. Given the pressures of the Special Period, current trends indicate a potential retreat on racial progress unless intervention occurs, at least in the economic and ideological spheres. In addition, the Special Period could also witness a process of racialization or manifest race consciousness by blacks and whites in Cuba. By racialization, I refer to a social process in which groups previously unracialized in their behavior and perspective evolve into powerful racial groups. A broad acceptance of the term "Afro-Cuban," for example, would indicate a mature race consciousness that has not existed in almost a century among black Cubans.¹ Such a development is not necessarily counterrevolutionary.

No serious social science studies have earnestly and rigorously interrogated the construction and continuing evolution of racial categories in Cuba. Nor have studies addressed how and why Cuban citizens self-define or place themselves in particular racial groups. With the exceptions of researcher Alejandro de la Fuente and sociologist Lourdes Casal, both of whom attempted to use available census data and other "official" information to assess the status of black Cubans, hard data concerning race relations

in Cuba have been scarce. De la Fuente, using census data from 1943, 1953, and 1981, attempts to extrapolate racial information by calculating percentages of black and white Cubans. Unfortunately, de la Fuente never seeks to understand why people choose to identify themselves as black, white, or mulatto. In the 1981 census, for instance, about 66 percent of those surveyed claimed to be white, whereas 12 percent said they were black. Any visitor to Cuba knows that this does not seem entirely accurate, given that Cuba appears to be primarily a black and mulatto nation. Casal, in contrast to de la Fuente, notes her

frustration in attempting to determine who is black, clearly stating the conditional nature of her suppositions about the status of Afro-Cubans in housing and health care.

A number of scholars have argued persuasively that where there are racial groups, there is racism. The social function of race, they have explained, is to foster inequity in a dialectic of supremacy and oppression. Our challenge as researchers and scholars is to determine the social role of race in Cuba, the nature of Cuba's particular racial categories, and the ways in which those categories have changed over time. Only then can we begin to understand the impact of the 1959 revolution in lessening (or furthering) racial inequality in Cuba. As noted above, the Cuban state takes the theoretical and ideological position that socialism eliminates the material and social basis for racism. This is a counter-Hegelian perspective that (at best) reduces racism to market relations and ignores the so-

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Cuban street festival. Photo by Chester Higgins Jr.

cial appropriation of whiteness—manifest in a Eurocentric social bias—as the core ideological and cultural engine of society. This view also does not account for the sociopsychological factors that govern racial identity. Until recently, with the rise of a regional Afro-Latino movement, the trope of racial democracy, common in a number of Latin American societies, has facilitated the development of low race consciousness among the region's black population. This trope ascribes differences in social power to factors other than race, such as class, culture, and region. It also creates a "mulatto escape hatch" through which blackness or Africanness can be avoided.

Despite some similarities with other Latin nations, Cuba poses unique problems when it comes to race. First, Cuban socialism signals a different ideological approach to the role of the state in addressing issues of race. As Cuban president Fidel Castro stated in 1966,

"We believe that the problem of discrimination has an economic content and basis appropriate to a class society in which man is exploited by man. . . . Discrimination disappeared when class privileges disappeared." The overwhelming majority of black Cubans appear to accept the official view that racism no longer functions with any power in Cuba.

Second, the revolution also sought specifically to confront the racial question. One of the first declarations of the new regime was to outlaw institutional racism. This move cut both ways, however. Under the new law, any effort at expressed racial group consciousness, from black as well as white Cubans, could and would be determined to be racist. Such groups were sure to find legal and political resistance from the state, whether or not their objectives were counterrevolutionary. In its conservative form, this "color-blindness" is ahistorical; it erroneously assumes that racial categories were constructed on balanced terms and that

black race consciousness emerges from the same social processes as white race consciousness and has the same objectives. Race in Cuba is further complicated by Cuba's paradoxical acceptance of black cultural expressions despite a complete denial of race as a variable in social or political life.

The theoretical framework best suited for explaining and assessing Cuba's racial dynamic is the "racial formation" paradigm developed by Michael Omi and Howard Winant in *Racial Formation* (and elaborated further in Winant's *Racial Conditions*). Their racial formation theory (RFT) argues that the relationship between racial groups, as well as the content of those groups, cannot be reduced to or explained by ethnicity, class, or "color-blind" frameworks. Instead, they contend that racial categories have their own dynamics of constantly shifting conflicts between racial groups. Although the particular social configurations of race relations will vary from society to society, one can still theorize and generalize about racial intercourse by noting and examining the ever-changing political construction of race, racial categories, and racial groups.

How do we make use of RFT in the Cuban context? Casal and political scientist Robert Smith offer useful theories in this regard. Casal, an Afro-Cuban herself, argues that racism functions as a multifaceted social phenomenon that manifests itself at five levels of society: economy, politics, society, culture, and language. She suggests that at any given moment progress in one area does not imply progress in all areas. She further argues that advancement, stagnation, and retreat may occur all at once. Racism, then, is not a cut that can be healed and forgotten but rather a virus that can generate a range of separate afflictions and leave lasting problems independent of the original infection. Although racism cannot be easily eradicated, it can be persistently monitored, its causes and symptoms attacked on multiple levels.

Smith suggests that racism has three arenas of manifestation: individual, institutional, and internal. He sees institutional racism where the "normal, accepted, routine patterns and practices of society's institutions have the effect or consequence of subordinating an individual or group, or maintaining in place the results of a past practice of now illegal overt racism" (emphasis in the original).² Referencing black psychiatrist Frantz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks*, Smith argues that black internalization of racial denial is not only possible but logical. Again, all three arenas operate simultaneously, and all must be conquered if racism is to be ended. Fusing RFT with Casal and Smith's frameworks, we can build a paradigm that accounts for all instances of racial encounters and allows us to assess the particularities of racism in any given society or racial group. Using this framework, we can analyze the constantly transforming individual, institutional, and internal manifestations of racism. For example, white Cuban rejection of the term "Afro-Cuban," the refusal by the state to appropriate the term in its official language, and black Cuban denial of a diasporic linkage with Afro-Latinos or African Americans would all be expressions of individual, institutional, and internal racial dilemmas. Despite national and historical differences, this paradigm takes us a long way in determining the nature of race relations in South Africa, England, Canada, Brazil, and other racially stratified nations.

Although we now have a workable model by which to assess race relations, it is difficult to put these categories to use in analyzing Cuba, given that the Cuban government does not itself use racial categories in collecting data. In key areas such as employment, housing, health care, criminal justice, and political participation, no current racial data exist. Although there are some ways to compensate for these problems (by comparing data

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from traditionally black, white, or mixed neighborhoods, for instance), this is obviously a serious methodological compromise.

In the wake of the revolution, the new government opened beaches, hotels, restaurants, clubs, recreational facilities, and other areas of Cuban society previously closed to Afro-Cubans. The revolutionary government used strong language and legal statutes to address the issue of racism. President Fidel Castro himself spoke to the issue. Soon after assuming power, he stated, "Of all forms of discrimination, the worst is that which limits the access of the Cuban black man to the working centers. Because it is a reality that in our country, in some sectors, there has existed a shameful procedure of exclusion of black people from work."

Unfortunately, official social data before and since the revolution offer little help in any attempt to assess the revolution's impact on Cuban race relations. As Casal states, the "paucity" of data makes it easy and problematic to distort the prerevolutionary situation. In other words, it is nearly impossible to measure the social status of blacks prior to 1959. So although we can assume with a great deal of accuracy that blacks generally suffered in relation to whites, we cannot know exactly how much they suffered. It is clear that certain occupations—that of hotel desk clerk, for example—were closed to

blacks. But the available data cannot tell us how that changed, or why. The government, then, has no empirical data to support its claim to have eradicated racism.

Postrevolution actions and speeches regarding race relations do, however, betray a certain concern with racism and race relations. First, as the revolution came to power, the government recognized that racial discrimination was significant enough to warrant state remediation. Second, the revolution's words and deeds powerfully undermined racism as a tool of the counterrevolution. Third, the fact that the government initiated no special programs to address racial discrimination meant that the revolutionary leaders assumed that a rising tide would lift all boats, that a broad distribution of wealth would necessarily benefit Afro-Cubans. This last assumption, not wholly unreasonable, was problematic on two fronts. First, it reduced racial discrimination to material relations, ignoring its political, social, and cultural-psychological dimensions. Second, Cuba was and is an underdeveloped nation with limited resources and material capacities. Under normal circumstances, material shortages are to be expected, making it safe to speculate that those already marginalized will remain so.

Cuba's post-1959 struggle over the issue of race occurred in the context of unrelenting U.S. attacks against the revolution. Internal

sabotage, political assaults, an economic blockade, and a full-scale invasion necessitated survival strategies that shaped the capacity of the revolution to address race, gender, and other issues. Today, the U.S. economic blockade continues to influence life in Cuba. As a consequence of the U.S. economic and political policies and the end of economic benefits from the Soviet Union, Cuba has entered what it terms a "Special Period," in which sacrifices of particular socialist goals and standards have occurred out of economic necessity. Cuban accommodation with multinational capital has begun in significant ways, ways that potentially will dramatically change the nature of labor and labor struggles on the island. The decision to focus on tourism is also likely to generate major social changes. As these transformations unfold, their impact on race relations should be monitored and assessed. Whether this will happen or not depends on how strongly the Cuban leadership holds on to the notion that racial discrimination has disappeared (permanently) in Cuba.

In the midst of such changes in Cuba, researchers must begin to ask themselves: If the Cuban government granted research carte blanche, how would one begin? First, I believe, researchers would have to note the impossibility of constructing an objective definition of race. Second, the Cuban people would have to be convinced of the value of a social science intervention on the question of race. At this point, many Cubans feel that the mere discussion of race introduces racism into the environment. In recent years, however, among a small cohort of primarily exile black Cubans, the term "Afro-Cuban" has reemerged, indicating an increased race consciousness among at least this small crowd. As much as possible, Cuban citizens and interested scholars must begin to recognize that uncovering the mask of color-blindness offers the possibility of real gains for all mem-

bers of Cuban society. It is time to conduct a study that informs and provides correctives for a problem that plagues not only capitalist societies, but socialist ones as well.

Notes

Research assistance was provided by Jason Higley.

1. The term "Afro-Cuban" was actually first used in 1847.
2. Robert C. Smith, *Racism in the Post-Civil Rights Era: Now You See It, Now You Don't* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995), p. 33.

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