

Racial Relations in Cuba

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Cuban Social Welfare Policy

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Upon informing people that the School of Social Work was going to Cuba most of the participants were met with the same strange question, “Are you allowed to do that?” Cuba is one of the physically closest islands in the Caribbean and yet little is known about it. The mystery that surrounds Cuba lends itself to all sorts of misconceptions about the people, the food, the culture, and the government. One of those misconceptions is on the notion of racism; does it exist or does it not? More research has been done on the concept of colorblind racism, racial ideology that expresses itself through nonracial terms (Williams, 2012), in the United States, but little research has been done in Cuba. Future research is likely to show that colorblind racism exists just as much in Cuba as it does in the United States.

In truth, Cuba is a beautiful country with a lot to offer anyone with an open mind. Children are treated as important members of the society and great lengths are taken to ensure they have the proper care. From the orphanages staffed by serious, kindhearted surrogate mothers to the community projects in less savory neighborhoods for before and after school programming, it is easy to see that children have a special place in Cuban society. This is definitely a unique view on childhood that the United States could benefit from. This embargo, or blockade as the Cubans call it, seems to not only be of goods but also of ideas and best practices that both countries could benefit from.

History of Race in Cuba: Before 1959

Founded as a Spanish colony, blacks were first imported from Africa as slaves to work on the sugar plantations. By 1898 Cuba had earned independence from Spain with the help of black slaves turned soldiers. In exchange for their service, the slaves were granted their freedom, even though slavery was officially abolished in 1886. Freedom was short lived however, as colonial

rule was traded from the hands of Spain to those of the United States. The US disbanded the primarily black army force and the competence of black men in politics was questioned.

Religions practiced by black groups, known as the naniguismo and the brujeria, were still allowed to practice as long as they observed Christian morals and public order as per a new penal code of 1901. The new police order viewed these non-Christian rituals as “uncivilized,” but under the new law the police could not simply make an arrest based on religion (Bronfman, 2004).

Those in Cuba who were once considered white were no longer so because under the new American standards mixed race persons were considered non-white. This created concern as illustrated in a letter to President McKinley from Leonard Wood; “We’re dealing with a race which has been decimated for hundreds of years and must be taught a new life, new principles and new ways to do things. After being swamped for centuries by the castoffs of Spanish society, there’s too much ‘mixed blood’ in the Island to join successfully the group of civilized nations” (Morales Dominguez, 31).

There became a power stratification, with whites on top, they held the power, wealth, and job opportunities of Cuba. When those now considered non-white spoke up to get in the upper rungs of the power structure they were accused of assaulting the new atmosphere of peace and racial coexistence that was now in place (Morales Dominguez, 2013). American diplomats in Havana described their Cuban counter parts as combining “the worst traits of the unfortunate mixture of Spanish and African culture, laziness, cruelty, fickleness, lack of responsibility and innate dishonesty” (32). Tensions further mounted upon the feared “Africanization” of Cuba and all things African had to be physically and culturally removed.

By the 1940s, some establishments were for mestizos only and some banned just blacks or just whites. The government only tangled in matters of race when employment was involved, as it did in 1917 when the slave labor act was passed to incorporate cheap Chinese labor in the sugarcane industry (Wei, 2013). After World War I this act was abolished since the industry was shrinking and the cheap Chinese labor was no longer needed. Some blacks, during the same time, were escaping the sugar life and hiding out in the worst of the urban neighborhoods. Blacks and mestizos were now speaking up again, not to have their races elevated but rather for equality to whites. Blacks were always the lowest paid of the laborers and if someone of African decent did rise in the employment ranks as a politician or journalist, there is little information recorded about them. Even black wives of white men of power were subject to a lower status, as they were not allowed to attend functions with their husbands. Black teachers also found their salaries lower than that of their lighter skinned counter parts (Morales Dominguez, 2013).

As a presidential candidate in 1944 said, “black and white Cubans are linked by their patriotic feelings and we can’t speak about black and white Cubans without deeply splitting the nationality” (De la Fuente, 2001). Black became synonymous with poor and few ever escaped their plight during the American occupation. Those who did escape the cycle of poverty had taken full advantage of the free education available to all. Even with their higher education, many blacks and mestizos found getting a good job to still be quite difficult. Racial differences were further marked when this population would move out of the poorer neighborhoods and into nicer, less crowded housing areas and they joined professional and political organizations that their education allowed them to be a part of (Morales Dominguez, 2013).

Race in Cuba: 1959-present

Then, in 1959, a man named Fidel Castro led a revolution against the racist government and in his success called for a debate on racism. Under Fidel, he stated that racism was no longer going to exist in Cuba. In 1962 the Second Declaration of Havana was established and declared that racism in Cuba had officially been eradicated. The newly established Communist Party stated that the “revolution had eliminated from Cuban life the odious and humiliating spectacle of discrimination because of skin color” (de la Funete, 2001). The theme seems to be that racism does not exist because the government does not talk about it.

The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1989 showed just how dependent Cuba was financially. This time, known as the Special Period, began to widen the income gap and create more prominent racial disparities. Many social programs slowly eroded away due to a lack of funding and there was more competition for scarce jobs and other resources (de la Fuente, 2001). Those Cubans that had fled to the United States began sending their families back in Cuba financial support. According to the 1990 census, Afro-Cubans only made up 16.5 percent of US exiles so for the blacks still living on the island during this time, family was not a substantial means of income. Tourism became a driving factor toward economic recovery but there is still a racial division there. There was a move to whiten the tourism sector with whiter Cubans on the service end and darker Cubans in back of the house positions (in class discussion, 2014). The dual currency system also stratified the differences, as one CUC is the equivalent of twenty-four Cuban pesos.

Economic hardships affect young black women the most (Dr. Lourdes, personal communication 2014). The version of Cuban women during the Special Period, and even still today, is one of a “beautiful hybrid;” mestizo, which is idealized and sexualized. However, black

and mestizo are the two groups that suffered the most during this time period. There was a general lack of food and a decline in living conditions (Dr. Garcia, PowerPoint). Children born during this time frame had lower birth weights and diseases that were at one point eradicated were making a resurgence. In the 2000s social programs were put into place aiming at the specific problems of groups in the worst of situations. Social expenses were at their highest from 2001 to 2005.

In 1998, the Union of Writers and Artists asked for a better representation of blacks in the media (de la Fuente, 2001). Writer Roberto Fernandez Retamar submitted a letter to congress commenting on “the unwillingness to debate in the open the problem of racial prejudice” and criticized the allocation of jobs to whites. Then in 1999, the Center for the Development of the Visual Arts in Havana held an exhibition on stereotypes surrounding blackness. Many pieces debunked stereotypes around black male sexual prowess and supposed violent nature. In that same year, Fidel acknowledged that racial discrimination had not disappeared in Cuba as initially planned and Raul Castro noted the need for women and people of color in governmental leadership positions. Raul further charged that due to the wide spread availability of education; there were plenty of well-qualified people for top positions.

Racial Relations in Cuba Today

While in Cuba the University of Pittsburgh students was rather inquisitive with the top question being, “What do you consider yourself?” Most of the time when someone is asked that in the United States they answer with their racial identity, African-American or Asian-American, unless they are Caucasian, in which case they answer just American, but in Cuba the majority of people simply answered “Cuban.” Racial identity was recognized when prompted to discuss it.

As Dr. Prieto (2014) noted, “the Cubans are Cubans because of their traditions not because of blood.”

Those who defected to the United States from Cuba had to adjust to no longer being considered “white.” By the American standards they were classified as “non-white” (in class discussion, 2014). While in Cuba, the “whitest” gentleman I saw was working at Ambos Mundos as a waiter. It was later learned, after he identified himself as “Cuban,” that his grandfather had moved to Cuba from France. He was technically only the second generation to be born in Cuba from his family but he still considered himself to be just Cuban not French-Cuban. All others appeared, to my non-racially sensitive eyes, to be mestizo or black. Even Dr. Prieto (2014) echoed this observation, “most people today are mulatos – very mixed.”

I could see the idea of the “beautiful Cuban brown” (in class discussion, 2014) being displayed right before us. With so much blending going on from decades of people coming into Cuba it would be quite difficult to say whether anyone was truly “white” or “black,” there seems to be, instead, a line that people fall on somewhere between black and white. The underlying racial tension, which is not discussed as much as felt and seen, forces people to claim which race they are more of. Whiteness is still synonymous with power and wealth, a term used lightly as most Cubans are poor, while blackness is still associated with poverty and powerlessness. The whiter Cubans are those in the service industry, catering to tourists and making the highly coveted CUCs, while the blacker Cubans are driving cabs for locals or selling fruit for the less valuable Cuban peso. The whiter Cubans also live in less crowded areas where the chance to own their home can be a reality as opposed to the areas where the blacker Cubans live, which is overcrowded, in need of repair, and is usually being rented out by the month. In a personal communication with a Cuban taxi driver he mentions that he hopes to not always be so poor but

recognizes that the likelihood is that he will be. He cites his obvious blackness, country upbringing, and lack of education as reasons he will remain in poverty. His friend who was selling books in Old Havana had a different outlook; once a social worker, he moved on to study law, and upon realizing there was no money to be made there either, he began selling books to tourists in Old Havana. He mentioned that his education afforded him a government job that came with government pay, which is pretty low. In communications with the University of Havana students they too mentioned that the government jobs do not pay well, a sentiment echoed by Ivis as well.

At one community project we visited, the director mentioned that racism used to be a real problem within that neighborhood. Mothers told their children not to play with the kids from their project building for a number of reasons all stemming from inaccurate stereotypes. When she started to renovate the project and have activities for the children collectively as a neighborhood is when racial relations in that neighborhood began to change. She had children from all over the community come to the center to play with the kids that lived there. This proved that they were good kids, they just happened to be black and poor. "Racism was a real problem here before the center. The center unites people and brings them together for a common task or to learn a new skill or hobby" (Community Project Director, personal communication 2014). Single mothers now mostly occupy the project with their small children in a non-dangerous way. This keeps them out of Old Havana and off the Malecon where they could get into trouble and further perpetuate old stereotypes in the form of a self-fulfilling prophecy or create new ones.

Conclusion

The government may be perpetuating the race issue by not discussing it but it very well may be the most successful government at eradicating certain aspects of racism (de la Fuente, 2001). “Not even you in the US can solve racism because it is a social construct,” (Dr. Lourdes, personal communication 2014). How does any nation go about solving a problem that is made up and is constantly changing in nature? Racism in Cuba went from exhuming the body of a Cuban Revolutionary leader and examining his skull, looking for evidence of “whiteness,” to socio-economic and political stratification, to a head in the sand approach where no one discusses the issue so therefore it is not a problem.

In addition to the community leader’s positive outcomes with her project, Esteban Morales provided a few suggestions of his own in a personal communication (2014); first, the problem needs to be recognized as ignorance. The introduction of the idea of racism needs to happen in schools right away. There is no overt racism in schools, but there is in the streets where these kids live. Second, children need to have their differences explained to them. Children recognize that they are physically different, so the system needs to stop pretending that they are not. The current “cure” of taking an abstinence approach, simply not discussing racism, is worse than the disease of racism Esteban maintains. The idea that “we are all Cubans” was suppose to unite the people but failed to do so. It fails to explain why people are different. Finally, give the people jobs. Take those that are unemployed and send them to a technical school.

These are all just a beginning to solve a very complex problem faced by different populations in different countries. As discussed in other classes, it simply is not good enough to enact an affirmative action plan, force employers to employ minorities, as this creates

unnecessary racial tensions. People need to accept their differences and celebrate them. African history has been written out of many countries' history books. It needs to be added back in as any history is incomplete without every group's role being accounted for. Children need to be taught that their differences exist but it does not make them different from one another. They may come from different places but, at least in Cuba, they are still Cuban.

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