

Some Questions About a Post-Blockade Cuba

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On the 23rd of March 2013, the *New York Times* published an article from the Cuban intellectual Roberto Zurbano, where he highlighted some of the fundamental contradictions of Cuban society that supported racial inequality. He also revealed, consequently, how some of the most common Cuban racism mutates and becomes, over time, even more sophisticated. As we know, this article cost the author his status; it was evident that official Cuba—i.e., institutions and bureaucrats—was not able to assimilate the critiques concerning the theme of Cuban racism and racial discrimination done by the revolutionary project and, much less, to look for solutions.

In addition to these questions that Zurbano raised, I would like to offer one in particular: why publish this in the media of the enemy? I ask it with all intentionality because I am afraid that seeing the United States of America as a confrontation will become something that is politically incorrect. In this sense, US Secretary of State John Kerry already placed the first cornerstone when, in the discourse he offered during the raising of the United States flag in the recently opened Embassy in Havana, he offered that we were not enemies but neighbors (Francisco & Elizalde, 2015).

To attempt to analyze the situation of Cuban Afro-descendants after the necessary fall of the United States' Embargo against Cuba, under which these new relations are no longer a utopia, can be interpreted as something very risky. Nonetheless, this present special issue aims to shed light on this anticipated change, some might say dangerously so, which is still in process. For now, the issue remains of knowing something about the Black and mestizx population in

Cuba, since the census and other surveys on the Island have not expressed any intention in obtaining any clarity about it (Álvarez Ramirez, 2013).

Without standing, if we follow the path of the researcher Mayra Espina (2014) about poverty in Cuba, we can infer that the situation has always been complicated, to say it one way. Apparently, the economic measures implemented in Cuba, in updating its economic model, could create more complexity if there is no implementation of public policy that permits political participation and socioeconomic equality in opportunities for the population that is in a disadvantaged situation. In fact, addressing the particularities of inequalities, especially those of a racial nature, is rarely named in the strategic reform documents.

The echoes of 17D, and the cascade of changes and events that this has generated, mark a new context for economic reform taking place in Cuba.¹ Among its social repercussions is the realization of a racial debate in Cuba connected to related themes such as poverty, exclusion, and marginalization. Without a doubt, among all of the measures that imply the normalization of relations between the two states, the reference to the blockade/embargo brings the attention and hope of everyone. Various generations do not know a Cuba other than a blockaded one, one that was constructed in opposition to the “imperialists from the North.” I grew up hearing about all of the bad things about Cuban society, tangible and imaginary, that were used as an excuse for the restrictive measures that, beginning in 1961, have made life miserable for people on the Island.

In the current context, marked by the interests of the United States of America’s government to eliminate the blockade, it is worth asking what will happen with Blacks and mestizos on the Island in light of an unblockaded Cuba? Will there be the creation, design, development, and implementation of public policies—such as affirmative action—that will break

¹ 17D is a reference to the 17th of December 2014, the day that Obama announced the United State’s interest in normalizing relations with Cuba.

the path of exclusion based on racial identity or skin color that will lead people to be seen in the same way that people have come to see the public polices that have benefited Cuban women in general? (Álvarez Ramirez, 2015). Would it be possible that there would be much talk about the resurgence of the Cuban economy that will include Black women who are undoubtedly excluded because of their racial identity and gender status? How do we protect them from objectified and sexualized representations when the advertising industry regains strength on the Island?

Many people infer that the increase in travel by United States citizens to the Island and the promotion of self-employment will have a positive impact and create numerous jobs in the tourism industry. I wonder, will expressions of racial discrimination return in state employment agencies? We remember in the 1990s, during the boom of the tourism industry, there were incidents like this. What will happen when private businesses employ or do not employ Black people?² The right of admission—although not legislated in this country, but used in a very fashionable way—prevents people from entering and enjoying life's experience equally.³ How will our judicial system evolve with the possible appearance of extreme manifestations of racism and racial discrimination?

To conclude, I will share a final idea from a conversation with the Spanish anthropologist Arianna Sánchez Reguant, who focused on the diversification of the Black subject as an area of study, of a way in which we can begin to discuss the diversity and pluralities of racial identities and skin color that are present on the Island.⁴ Similarly, I presume Cuba will see itself in a similar manner, and as one homogeneous country, like the perspective of many scholars who are involved in undertaking the academic debate about race and nation. However, as Odette

² In less than one year, we have seen work opportunities advertised on Cuban websites where they have explicitly mentioned the skin color of the applicant.

³ On the Island we have a long tradition of preventing entry into certain public spaces that is frankly a violation of the Magna Carta of the republic, some of them are maintained even today.

⁴ Personal communication.

Casamayor (2015) poses the question, “When the Enemy fades, what reason will be left for Black Cubans to continue silencing ourselves and our racial experiences with the goal of maintaining sacred national unity, the way we have been doing since the nineteenth century?”

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Retrieved from http://www.nytimes.com/2013/03/24/opinion/sunday/for-blacks-in-cuba-the-revolution-hasnt-begun.html?_r=1

Translation by Tanya L. Saunders