

Introduction to Race in Cuba

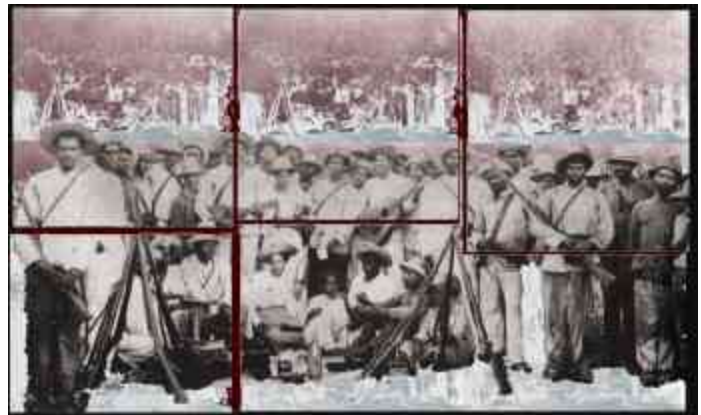
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To insist on the divisions into race, on the differences of race... is to make difficult both public and individual enterprises, which depend for their success on a greater rapprochement between the groups that must live together... Everything that divides men, everything that classifies, separates, or shuts off men is a sin against humanity... Man is more than white, more than mulatto, more than Negro.

- José Martí

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Almost since the beginning of the Cuban struggle for separation from the Spanish empire, it was obvious to Cubans that racial unity would be a crucial factor in victory. This unity became the basis of rebel ideology, and the target of empire rhetoric, with racial myths exploited at every possibility.



The Cuban's struggle for independence had to overcome not only racist Spanish empire propaganda, but also its own internal racism, and this was a big factor in the stalemate ending of the Ten Year War. The ensuing Pact of Zanjón gave Cubans a list of Empire promises that were mostly broken, and failed to bring an immediate end to slavery. Under the terms of Zanjón slaves who fought in the war, on either side, were immediately set free, but those who did not fight had to endure almost another decade of slavery.

When slavery finally ended in 1886, a new form of cultural and racial subjugation was introduced, based largely on exaggeration of the racial myths prevalent in polite Cuban society, and seeking a similar result as that seen in North America with the failure of Reconstruction.

For a while it seemed that Black Cubans would not share the same misfortune as their Black North American neighbors. Schools and business opportunities were slowly opening up as legal victories and persistent rhetoric from black and white Cubans became known and shared. Men like José Martí, Antonio Maceo, Juan Gualberto Gómez, and many others provided the framework for a Cuban ideology in which racial equality was the seed from which society grew.

"The difference in Cuba after emancipation," wrote Cesar J. Ayala in *Latin American Research Review* (Vol. 30, #1, 1995), "was that white Cubans, white immigrants, and some Chinese worked as wage laborers alongside the former slaves."

The inevitable War of Independence (1895-98) reaffirmed the promise of racial equality. Separation from Spain and self-determination meant a Cuban society for blacks and whites alike. The outcome, however, was not even close to what the Cubans fought for.

With the U.S. intervention of 1898, Cuba's fate seemed to pass from one empire to another. When the U.S. military finally pulled out of Cuba in 1902, they left behind a pseudo-colony under the grip of the Platt Amendment. Also left by the U.S. was a Cuban government much different from what the Cubans had envisioned for themselves a decade earlier through Martí's Cuban Revolutionary Party.

"Through the Permanent Treaty," wrote Philip G. Wright of The Brookings Institution in *The Cuban Situation and Our Treaty Relations* (1931), "American investors were virtually given a guaranty of protection for such properties as they might acquire in Cuba and also a preferred market in the United States for such articles as they might produce on Cuban soil." American influence, however, did not benefit those with darker skin, nor did it improve race relations in Cuba.

In peacetime, the new Cuba seemed to have less need for her black sons and daughters than the old Cuba in wartime. In Oriente, as in the rest of the country, blacks found themselves shut out from business and educational opportunities, and with few, if any, political allies.

Racial harmony took a serious wrong turn in 1912 in what was described as a "race war" but turned out to be little more than the brutal slaughter of blacks in Oriente by the Cuban army under orders of President José Miguel Gómez, who wanted to avoid another U.S. military intervention.



"In 1929-30," wrote Alejandro de la Fuente in the *Journal of Contemporary History* (Jan, 1995), "blacks and mulattoes were severely underrepresented in all the specialties at university level, their proportional representation never being higher than 55 percent of what it should have been in terms of their percentage of the total population."

Some gains had been made in educational opportunities, but the island was still far from what the Mambises had fought for in the various wars for Cuban independence.

Cuba's different views on race, and her ideological devotion to a race-blind society, made this issue a target of the empires that controlled her. The island's casual attitude towards race is one of the major differences between the empires that have ruled her and the "future" she has made.

"She has this great asset," wrote Philip G. Wright in 1931, "she combines with the luxuriance of a tropical country a temperature sufficiently moderate to admit of her being peopled by the white race without loss of vigor." Cuba's population at the time was about evenly split between black and white ethnicities, and blacks had participated in the war of independence in large numbers.

Elsewhere in his book Mr. Wright makes another reference to race. "It must be remembered that from a fourth to a third of the population of Cuba is negro or mulatto and while the social status of the blacks is relatively much better than in the United States, nevertheless the Spaniards and white Cubans, like business men in the United States, hesitated at the prospect of democracy with so large a proportion of the population persons of color."

To justify their differences with Cuban society, Empire pundits often referred to philosophical agreements with "the better elements of the educated classes," which were usually white. The "other" Cubans, looked down upon because of their skin color or lack of wealth, were of little concern, so their "disagreement" was deemed unimportant. Everyone from senators to presidents to high-profile business leaders went on record that "the right Cubans," or "polite society," or even "white Cuba" was "in full agreement with our goals for the island."

The importance of Cubans' "color" was considered a "danger," evident in the enforced census of 1899. "The census itself had been conducted to quantify the magnitude and extent of such danger," wrote Alejandro de la Fuente in *Latin American Perspectives*, "for the U.S. Government of Occupation considered accurate knowledge of the racial composition of the Cuban population a precondition for providing the island with an appropriate political system." A "whitening" of society was attempted, with "massive immigration of white workers and their families through several plans of colonization."

"In this context," wrote Pedro Pérez Sarduy and Jean Stubbs in *Afro-Cuban Voices On Race and Identity in Contemporary Cuba*, "Bettering or 'whitening' the race denoted upward social mobility, while 'blackening' was equated with backwardness, poverty, and underdevelopment."

The plan didn't work, and the sugar industry eventually was allowed to import workers, who were usually black and earned less than Cuban citizens.

"By 1910 it was becoming clear how much of Africa remained in Cuba," wrote Hugh Thomas in *Cuba, or The Pursuit of Freedom*. "One can also contrast this with the U.S. where the Negroes, mostly Fanti or Ashanti in origin (so far as Virginia was concerned) or Dahomean

and sometimes Angolan (Bantu) in Louisiana or Mississippi, had lost, or been forced to lose, much more of their native African culture. A number of Cuban place names (such as Songo, Cambute, Zaza, even the heroic Yara) were of African origin. In Cuba, attendance at and participation in African ceremonies was not confined to pure Negroes. Mulattoes, even sometimes whites, took part."

"By the 1920s," wrote de la Fuente, "whitening had failed, and it was increasingly evident that Cuba would never fulfill the elite's vision of a Caucasian paradise in the tropics."

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Cuba's soul is mestizo (half-breed), and it is from the soul, not the skin, that we derive our definite color. Someday it will be called "Cuban color." - Nicolas Guillén, 1972

Today Cuba remains a racial paradox, as institutional racism has been removed from society, but not from the hearts and actions of some who hang on as if to sacred tradition. There's the fact of the low representation of blacks in Cuba's vast travel industry, and some critics point out that every top Cuban leader during the past 75 years has been white.

"Nobody can consider himself pure breed and of a superior race," said Castro in March 1959.

"In the early 1980s," wrote de la Fuente, "Cuba's black and mulatto population was probably the only one in the hemisphere whose members could expect to live to more or less the same age as their white countrymen." [For black Cubans in the 1980s, life expectancy was 70.2, only one point lower than Cuban whites at 71.2. In the United States, white life expectancy was at 74.4, and for blacks it was 68.1. *]

In the 1990s, wrote Pérez Sarduy, "the political and racial division between Cubans on the island (mainly black and brown) and Cubans in Miami (overwhelmingly white) was made apparent in the receptions each group gave South African leader Mandela: in Cuba he was welcomed as a hero, but not so in Miami. In June 1990, shortly before a planned visit to Florida as part of his U.S. tour, four Cuban American mayors of Miami signed a letter declaring Nelson Mandela persona non grata. Any sign of support for Cuba was to be denounced. (Mandela had often expressed appreciation for Cuba's solidarity in ending apartheid.) The African American community declared a boycott of Miami, which was ineffective, and demanded an apology from the Cuban Americans, which was never offered. The conflict also signaled divisions among Cuban Americans, as Afro-Cubans distanced themselves from Cubans of Hispanic descent."

Many more questions are raised by these topics. Would Cuba have conquered racism altogether if left to her own devices after the War of Independence? Will institutional U.S.-style racism return to Cuba once Castro is gone?

"On guard, black man! On guard, white man!" said social historian Fernando Ortíz in 1942. "All Cubans together, on guard! And stand forever close together, for our liberties and our lives are in danger."

Without the black, Cuba would not be Cuba.

- Fernando Ortíz, 1942

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[* Race and Inequality in Cuba, 1899-1981, *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol. 30, No. 1 (Jan., 1995), Pg 131-168]

Race in Cuba

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