Race, National Discourse, and Politics in Cuba: An Overview

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by
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"Please, do not speak about races," a reader of the *Miami Herald* who defined himself as a "Cuban mulatto" requested. "Comments like these do us a lot of harm . . . what you are doing is dividing us" (Suárez, 1994). His was but one of a number of letters commenting on the publication of several articles about race in Cuba, a topic numerous readers found especially dangerous at a time when Cuban-Americans had to stay as united as ever to confront the real enemy, Fidel Castro. Not surprisingly, those who had dared to address such a delicate issue were black authors (González, 1994; Patterson, 1994).

This tension between the open acknowledgment of Cuban racial diversity and the convenience of avoiding, ignoring, or silencing it is far from new in Cuban national discourse and imagery. Cubans have been trying to find unity and common ground for at least a century and have frequently perceived race as an obstacle to reaching this goal. In fact, the situation and the arguments re-created by these concerned Cuban-Americans are not terribly different from those that Cuban émigrés were confronting 100 years ago. Then, as now, they were struggling to achieve unity against their common, real enemy (Spanish colonialism). Then, as now, race was or could be used as a divisive issue, one that should best be silenced. None other than José Martí (1992: 205-207), Cuba's greatest ideologue and the architect of the fusion of anticolonial forces under a common, pro-independence banner, wrote in New York in 1893,

> 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.

Unity could be achieved only if the nationalist discourse could reconcile
race and nation, two categories that the colonial authorities had successfully
presented throughout the nineteenth century as incompatible. A conscious
and selective silence about race and the racial composition of the inde-
pendence forces was the first strategy for neutralizing the alleged incompati-
bility: among true Cubans there were neither blacks nor whites, just Cubans.
"Cuban is more than white, more than mulatto, more than Negro," Martí had
also said. Additionally, to the manipulation by the colonial authorities of the
"black peril"—the claim that independence would turn Cuba into a black
republic in the Haitian style and that Afro-Cubans wanted independence to
take control over the island—Martí opposed the cross-racial nature of the
pro-independence movement, whose purpose was to create a new republic in
which all Cubans, regardless of race and social status, would participate and
from which all would benefit. He therefore proposed that Cubans unite under
a different faith: "Let us put around the star of the new flag, this formulation
of triumphant love: 'With all, and for the good of all' " (Martí, 1992: 8-17,
511-518).

But the nationalist forces required also the support of those who did fear
that Cuba would become a black republic, so Martí referred also to blacks'
generosity, their virtues, their love for sensible freedom, their gratefulness,
and their prudence. He insisted that blacks had participated extensively and
in an orderly fashion in Cuban wars for independence before; that, to those
who denied their capacity and discriminated against them, blacks would
oppose intelligence and virtue, never violence; that blacks themselves would
exterminate any "black peril" in the island should a "nasty demagogue" or
"angry souls" emerge. The Cuban Republic had never spoken of whites or
blacks since the passage of its first constitution in Guáimaro in 1869, Martí
claimed. Then, he concluded, "the Negro who proclaims his racial character
. . . authorizes and brings forth the white racist. . . . Two racists would be
equally guilty, the white racist and the Negro" (1992: 205-207).

National unity was to be achieved at the expense of racial identities, and
therefore the colonial discourse that stressed the incompatibility of race and
nation was to some extent respected, albeit reconstructed and given a whole
new inclusionary meaning. Afro-Cubans would have to choose between

being black and thus serving the colonialist purpose of portraying the nation as racially irreconcilable or being members of an allegedly raceless nationalist force. No opportunity seemed to be open for blacks to be *Afro* and *Cuban* at the same time. Any possibility for blacks to voice their specific grievances and discontent was explicitly rejected as un-Cuban and unpatriotic. Juan Gualberto Gómez, mulatto leader of the separatist forces, summarized this view in 1893: "We are Cubans, nothing more."

But the nationalist discourse could be used for a multiplicity of purposes and interpreted in often contradictory and competing ways, all with a certain degree of ideological legitimacy. It could be used by those who advocated silencing racial issues as a threat to Cubanness and national integrity, but it also provided a set of legitimate principles and goals for those who sought to turn the ideal into a tangible reality (see Ferrer, 1991; 1995).

Recent scholarship has stressed, however, that this foundational discourse, frequently referred to as "the myth of racial equality," was an ideological construction of the elite that masked the objective structural subordination of Afro-Cubans in society (see Helg, 1995; Kutzinski, 1993). These researchers recognize that, once established and accepted, these myths become, as Viotti da Costa (1985: 235) puts it, an integral part of social reality, but they tend to see their effects in only one direction: that of the subordination and demobilization of blacks. This is an interpretation that minimizes the capacity of subordinate groups to appropriate these inclusionary ideologies and use them to their advantage. Furthermore, as is the case in other Latin American countries, the formulation of these ideologies is traced through the writings of a few selected intellectuals rather than viewed as a contested process in which blacks had their own voice and their own interpretation of what a racially inclusive nationhood was supposed to mean (for a discussion and a few examples, see Graham, 1990).

This article reviews and summarizes a century of Cuban discourse about race and attempts to show that the so-called myth of racial equality was open to contending interpretations and appropriations. To elite interpretations that stressed the need to silence race in the name of national unity and Cubanness, blacks responded that it was precisely because all Cubans were equal that they should openly debate questions of race. Furthermore, through their appropriation of the myth, blacks were able to accumulate a modicum of power and to resist exclusion from the social and political life of the country. The view that the nationalist ideology served only to justify and entrench structural inequalities ignores the creativity of blacks as historical agents and the frequently unforeseen effects of these ideologies on social relations. As John Rex (1970: 51) contends, once a "belief system is used to justify a

particular stratification situation, that situation is itself changed thereby and the belief system may set in motion wholly new social processes."

RACIAL FRATERNITY, WHITE-STYLE

Intellectuals, politicians, and public figures of all colors and ideological tendencies argued throughout the postindependence period over whether the republic of all and for all was an achievement or simply a goal to be pursued. A dominant discourse is clearly discernible, however. It maintained that both blacks and whites had struggled together for independence, that the republic did not recognize privileges of any kind, and that the constitution clearly stated that all Cubans were equal before the law. Blacks allegedly enjoyed the same opportunities as all citizens, based only on their merits, education, and patriotism. They could vote, hold public office, enter educational institutions, and perform any job for which they were qualified (Martínez, 1929; Tejera, 1939; "Unidad de razas," *La Lucha*, September 3, 1907).

This argument also stressed that Cuban racial fraternity, forged during the independence struggle, was, or should be, based on blacks' recognition of the great sacrifices whites had made to "liberate them"—an elaboration of Martí's blacks' "gratefulness." As a conservative newspaper ("La nota del día," *La Discusión*, September 23, 1908) stated, "There is no country where the white has done as much for the black. For blacks to be free . . . many prominent whites struggled and died. . . . Blacks by themselves would never have become free." Even during the times of slavery, the relationship between whites and blacks had allegedly been softer and more harmonous in Cuba than in any other country. Slavery itself had been abolished because of the titanic efforts, dedication, and generosity of a group of worthy white Cubans who had raised their voices in the Spanish parliament to snatch manumission away from the colonial government and of those, equally worthy, who had sacrificed their own well-being, fortunes, and families to fight for their freedom ("Lo que era la esclavitud en Cuba," *La Discusión*, November 13, 1908). As the prominent white patriot Manuel Sanguily declared, "We pauperized and ruined ourselves on their account; . . . as Martí, who did so much for them, said, we suffered as they did, indeed more than they did, and bravely fought for our own liberty and for [their] manumission" (The Chargé d'Affaires to the Secretary of State, Havana, February 23, 1910, U.S. National Archives, RG 59/837.00 /1284). *La Discusión* would then ask in all candor, "Don't those who . . . elevated and dignified [the black race] deserve, at least, some gratitude?"

The myth of Cuban racial fraternity certainly attempted to deracialize Afro-Cubans, but it also legitimated a set of principles and practices according to which it was not just or patriotic to eliminate blacks altogether from public and political life. Therefore, when the U.S. Government of Occupation (1898-1902) restricted suffrage, a cross-racial movement of protest made clear that "the Cuban people" would not tolerate "any violation of the principles of democracy." Consequently, the Constitutional Convention that gathered in 1901 established universal (male) suffrage as a principle of a republic that recognized no differences among its citizens (de la Fuente, 1996a).

Likewise, Military Governor Leonard Wood's attempt to create an all-white artillery corps in the island was opposed by the veterans of the Liberation Army, who demanded that blacks have the opportunity to enlist. In the name of the Council of Veterans, General José Alemán and Colonel Estrampes, both of whom were white, asked Wood not to exclude men of color from the artillery corps. The officers reminded Wood that blacks and whites had fought together for the freedom of Cuba, often under "colored " leaders, and that Afro-Cubans' exclusion was contrary to justice and the "democratic and revolutionary traditions" of the Liberation Army. In other words, white veterans made clear that there was a blatant contradiction between the integrationism of Cuban nationalist discourse and the segregationist policies of the U.S. Government of Occupation ("El Centro de Veteranos y Wood," *El Mundo,* October 16, 1901; "Asuntos varios: La artillería cubana," *Diario de la Marina,* January 19, 1902; Cuba, Military Governor, 1902, vol. 1: 191).

Whites, including many members of the Liberation Army, subscribed to the myth of racial equality and a raceless nation, but they also identified Cuba's future progress and prosperity with the whitening of the country. As anywhere else in the North Atlantic world, an appropriate racial composition was perceived as a precondition for progress and modernity. In this way, the act of hiding and silencing individuals of African descent within a racially inclusive notion of nationhood was not only a purely ideological exercise. At a more concrete level, blacks and blackness were attacked through a program of state-encouraged immigration that sought to dilute them in a torrent of white blood.

The need to endow Cuba with a sufficiently large white population, as the U.S. Military Governor requested in 1901, had become painfully clear in 1900 when the results of the 1899 census were released. When *Diario de la Marina* ("El censo," April 22, 1900) examined these figures, it underlined what it considered to be the census's most important outcome: one-third of

the Cuban population was colored. The columnist elaborated that this situation represented an obvious danger for the white race living on the island and claimed that the only way to avert a future catastrophe was to stimulate white immigration. This danger was not new, but census results had ratified the worst fears of the white elite, who had repeatedly stated throughout the nineteenth century that population—that is, the ethnic factors that constitute it—was the country's greatest problem. For the first time since the 1850s, the proportion of whites in the total population had declined compared with the previous census. Rather than consolidating the numerical superiority of the Aryans and their descendants, the war for independence had turned Cuba into a darker republic. The somber and sinister future faced by the "terrorized Caucasian population" of other Caribbean islands was now felt at home (de la Fuente, 1997).

The census itself had been conducted to quantify the magnitude and extent of such danger, 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, "the first and necessary step in building up the structure of their government" (Elihu Root to Leonard Wood, Washington, February 28, 1900, Library of Congress, Manuscripts Division, Leonard Wood Papers, 28). To the dismay of the white ruling sector, it became evident that Afro-Cubans would play a prominent role in Cuban life in the future not only because of their participation in the wars for independence but also because they were, as *La Lucha* put it, "many" ("La población de Cuba," September 21, 1899).

The Cuban state did promote the massive immigration of white workers and their families through several plans of colonization but only with marginal success. Although a large number of Spaniards came to the island every year, most of them stayed only for the sugar harvest, returning home during the so-called dead season. According to figures from the Cuban treasury, in the 1902 through 1931 period 780,000 Spaniards entered the island, but the number of permanent settlers never went beyond 250,000. Spaniards represented 8 percent to 9 percent of the total population between 1899 and 1919, but their proportion in the total population declined thereafter and was less than 7 percent in the early 1930s (Naranjo Orovio, 1984; 1994; Iglesias, 1988; Maluquer de Motes, 1992). In other words, the immigration of entire families, which is what the Cuban state had encouraged as a way to whiten the island, had failed. According to census data, the proportion of whites in the total population increased from 67 percent to 72 percent between 1899 and the 1920s-1930s, but those labeled as "black" or "mulatto" were still a sizable proportion of the total population. Afro-Cubans' concern about the disappearance of blacks—"in one hundred years there will not be a black in Cuba," the

Afro-Cuban newspaper *Juvenil* had anticipated in 1913 (Bravo, 1913)—was
in fact as exaggerated as the optimism of certain whites who speculated that
blacks' lower natural increase, combined with immigration, would guarantee
their virtual extinction (Pepper, 1899: 147; U.S. War Department, 1899: 97;
Mustelier, 1912: 35-39). They were all wrong. By the 1920s, whitening had
failed, and it was increasingly evident that Cuba would never fulfill the elite's
vision of a Caucasian paradise in the tropics.

BREAKING THE SILENCE

The corollary of the dominant version of Cuban racial democracy was, of
course, that there was no racial problem in Cuba and that those who referred
to it were just provoking racial divisions on the island, a sacrilege on Martí's
memory and on his republic with all and for all. Moreover, they were
underestimating the social significance of the independence movement and,
by doing so, taking an unpatriotic stand and insulting the lives and memories
of Cuba's dearest heroes. If differences between blacks and whites were to
be found, they were due to blacks' lack of education and to their inferiority
complex. The racial problem in Cuba was a cultural one, a problem of
aesthetic perceptions, a psychological mechanism that time itself would
correct through indirect and gradual means, never through open confrontation
(Mañach, 1929; 1939; 1949; Lufríu, 1914; Muzaurieta, 1951). "The black
problem exists only when it is talked about, and that is playing with fire"
(Remos, 1953).

But play with fire blacks did, and they did it all the time. To the argument
that racial fraternity had been achieved during the independence struggle and
that the Cuban republic had been created with all and for all, they responded
that it was precisely for those reasons that blacks deserved full and equal
participation in the economic, social, and political life of the country. It was
exactly because of their extensive participation in the struggle, to which they
had contributed more than their share, that they had gained the right to full
citizenship (Fernández Cabrera, 1946). To the argument that blacks were
indebted to whites for their freedom, they responded, amid protests of racial
fraternity, that the abolition of slavery was not an example of generosity by
the Cuban master or Spanish colonial authorities but a conquest of the black
insurgents of the 1868 war. As Lino Dóu (1916a) observed, *restituir no es
ceder* ("to give back is not to cede").

Thus, blacks did find, after all, a solution to the "unsolvable dilemma"
(Helg, 1995: 7) that the elite's myth of racial equality posed. It is true that the
alternatives were few, given that the myth had become indistinguishable from

the dominant national discourse: if blacks chose to be "Afro" and opposed it, they could easily be labeled unpatriotic and violators of sacred national unity. If they conformed to it and behaved like "Cubans," then they renounced the possibility of voicing their grievances and advancing their cause. But there was a third way: to be Afro-Cuban. Blacks appropriated the myth of racial equality, based on the nationalist paradigm of racial integration, and reinterpreted it to their advantage. They struggled in the name of the same cause, although for different purposes.

Thus, whereas the dominant discourse treated Martí's cordial republic as an achievement, blacks portrayed it as a goal, an unfulfilled dream whose legitimacy was guaranteed by a common, uncontested ideological source. In 1909, Juan de Dios Cepeda, a black leader of the Partido Independiente de Color (Colored Independent Party), characterized the dominant political discourse defending the rights of the "black brothers, Cuba with all and for all," as a *cantilena*, an old folk song that no one believed anymore (Manifiesto impreso Partido Independiente de Color dirigido a todos los hombres de color, October 20, 1909, Archivo Nacional de Cuba, Fondo Especial, Leg. fuera, 9-22). "We speak and work practically so that the ideal of the Apostle of our freedoms, José Martí, who dreamed and wanted a cordial Republic 'with all and for all,' may be a reality and not a myth," a black woman asserted in 1929 (Alvarez, 1929). When, years later, the black communist leader Salvador García Agüero (1953) denounced the fact that Antonio Maceo's grandson had been discriminated against in Guantánamo while the centennial of Martí's birth was being commemorated, he said, " 'With all and for all,' remember?"

By denouncing a social order that benefited only a few, despite claims to the contrary by the ruling sector, blacks and other social and political groups also broke the silence on race. Their argument was convincing enough: the only way to solve Cuba's racial problem was to acknowledge its existence and to discuss it openly. "Poor us if we continue with this sepulchral silence!" the black veteran Ricardo Batrell exclaimed in 1907. And break the silence they did, mainly through their journals, newspapers, and frequent contributions to the mainstream press, keeping the so-called race problem in the forefront of Cuba's public attention.[1] They denounced the subordinated position of colored people in Cuban society, offered a counterview to the dominant discourse on many issues, and, more important, reminded the reader that Cuba was not the Caucasian paradise that some envisioned but a multiracial country that owed its existence to the combined efforts of whites and blacks.

The radically different ways in which independent Cuba was imagined and represented by whites and Afro-Cubans became abundantly clear in the

polemic generated around the massive introduction of West Indian laborers
in the 1910s and 1920s. Although the Cuban government had opposed the
introduction of black workers since the beginning of the republic, the all-
powerful sugar companies had ultimately succeeded in getting authorization
to import them freely. Planters' associations such as the Círculo de Hacen-
dados (Planters' Association), the Liga Agraria, and, later, Fomento de la
Inmigración had constantly represented the need to increase the labor supply
to strengthen their position vis-à-vis labor. "The insane competition between
the ingenios for cane cutters during the crop season demoralizes the men,"
claimed an executive of the Jatibonico sugarmill (William Craib to George
H. Whigham, Jatibonico, October 3, 1913; Unknown to Craib, no place,
October 2, 1913, McKeldin Library, University of Maryland, Cuba Company
Papers, Series I, Box 9, 142). Operating in a market with limited labor supply,
employers were unable to impose their own conditions and were forced to
bargain with labor. They referred to the demoralized condition of workers
who, "conscious of the advantages of their position," had "exaggerated
pretensions" concerning payment and, in the best slavery tradition, suggested
that the establishment of forced labor was the only viable solution (Atkins,
1926: 306; "Escasez de trabajadores," *Diario de la Marina,* June 19, 1900;
"Invitación," *La Unión Española,* February 8, 1900).

This would not be necessary, however. Between 1912 and 1931, more than
300,000 black workers from Haiti, Jamaica, Barbados, and other Caribbean
islands entered Cuba to work in the expanding sugar sector, mainly in the
eastern provinces of Camagüey and Oriente, where U.S. capital had devel-
oped some of the biggest and most modern centrales in the island (Pérez de
la Riva, 1979; Alvarez Estévez, 1988; Petras, 1988).

Although most of these laborers were only seasonal immigrants, their
entry met with strong resistance in Cuban intellectual and (nonsugar) eco-
nomic circles, who looked with apprehension to what was represented as a
black "invasion" of the country and a deadly blow to the whitening ideal.
White Cubans feared that with the increase of Antillean immigrants blacks
would become predominant in the island and that they would attempt to
"dominate whites." A widely read article published by *Gráfico* in 1916
claimed that the population of the island should be increased with "ethnic
elements similar to the more numerous group of inhabitants, which is that of
the white race," and recalled what the racist ideologue José Antonio Saco had
claimed in the nineteenth century: that Cuba's "future and prosperity" de-
pended on the increase of the white population (Vasconcelos, 1916). The
progressive blackening of Cuba was identified with its "slow decadence, its
certain intellectual ruin," and blamed on foreign sugar barons who sought to
turn the country into a huge dark plantation. U.S. planters and the U.S.

Chamber of Commerce in Havana were accused of being "more concerned with the cost of sugar production than with the effects on Cuba's future" of the annual immigration of several thousand "healthy and full grown men of the colored race." What was at stake, white Cubans warned, was nothing less than the "racial and cultural future" of the country. "This is the great racial tragedy of Cuba: its growing Africanization" ("Cuba: Caso antillano," *Revista de Avance,* October 15, 1929, 287-288; Edward I. Nathan, Cuba's population problems, Santiago de Cuba, April 24, 1928, U.S. National Archives, RG 59/837.55/83; Cruz, 1928; "Tierra y población en las Antillas," *Revista de Avance,* November 30, 1927, 87-88).

Antilleans were represented as a threat to the nation and to Cuban civilization on several grounds. Most frequently, they were portrayed as a health risk to the country, their importation being compared to an invasion of deadly germs that would infect Cuba's clean, healthy social body. The organization in 1916 of a public health system that allowed no immigrants from Jamaica, Haiti, and Puerto Rico to enter the island without a microscopic blood test designed to discover the probable existence of germs of malaria or other infectious diseases was a graphic materialization of those fears (Merrill Griffith to the Secretary of State, Santiago de Cuba, May 31, 1916, U.S. National Archives, RG 59/837.55 /33). President Alfredo Zayas (1921), for instance, described the "Antillean immigrants of the colored race" as "devoid of even the most elementary notions of hygiene" and portrayed the island as a besieged territory "surrounded by intense focuses of epidemics and quarantinable diseases."

The public health reasons, however, barely concealed the actual reason for rejecting these immigrants: their race. The U.S. consul in Santiago de Cuba elaborated on this subject in a confidential letter in 1916 (Griffith to the Secretary of State, Santiago de Cuba, June 1, 1969, U.S. National Archives, RG 59/837.55/34):

> Neither the health authorities here nor in Havana nor elsewhere entertain any serious apprehension with regard to the introduction of malaria, filaria or miasmatic germs of whatever character. . . . There are practically no objections to them at all, physically, but chiefly on account of their color. They are . . . as black as coal and the authorities here view with alarm this constant augmentation of the already high percentage of Negroes in this vicinity. They perhaps have vividly in mind the recent race riots and revolutions which occurred in Santiago de Cuba and vicinity, the present generally recognized disquietude of this predominating element of the population . . . and the disposition of these Negroes to be easily excited by a few ring leaders toward outwards manifestations of discontent and perhaps violence.

Thus, Antilleans were seen as a "dangerous invasion" also in political terms, the agents of a revived "black peril" that might undermine Cuban racial fraternity.

To counteract the potential emergence of feelings of racial solidarity between the immigrants and Afro-Cubans, the white dominant discourse drew a line that separated foreign and native blacks to the detriment of the former. Whereas Afro-Cubans were presented as hardworking, intelligent, devoid of criminal instincts, and seldom heavy drinkers—in sum, the best among "all the blacks in the world"—Antilleans were depicted as trouble-makers, drunks, thieves, and killers. The immigration of Haitians and Jamaicans was presented as an "avalanche" that would diminish the "percentage of black culture and morality" in Cuba. Since black natives were clearly "superior," went the argument, they were those who lost the most with the entry of these undesirable immigrants (Billiken, 1916; Urrutia, 1928). The beliefs and religious rites of the "fanatic savages" coming from the "jungles of Haiti and Jamaica" would influence black Cubans' own atavistic *brujería*, and such contact could only produce aggravated forms of criminality and fetichism. Moreover, brujería was often equated with voodooism, giving any religious act with African roots a distinctive Haitian flavor (Castellanos, 1916; "Gente no deseable," *Diario de la Marina*, November 23, 1922).

The notion of Antilleans' undesirability found support in almost every corner of Cuban society, but it did not go uncontested. Blacks protested the campaign against these darker immigrants, exposing its racist character. To the argument that West Indians were primitive and responsible for the Africanization of the country, black intellectuals responded that Cuba was not white and that what the supporters of such argument truly sought was to whiten the island through the elimination of its black population. Moreover, they labeled as hypocritical any discourse that opposed West Indians in the name of native workers while encouraging the massive entry of white workers from Spain (Levargie, 1916; Neyra y Lanza, 1916; Bravo, 1916). They contested the notion that these white immigrants were intellectually or in any other way superior to West Indians. As Lino Dóu (1916b) stated, neither Ramón y Cajal, Pablo Iglesias, Blasco Ibáñez, nor Pío Baroja had come to Cuba as an immigrant.

Although Afro-Cuban intellectuals usually agreed that it was not benefi-cial to stimulate the introduction of West Indians, they resented the racist explanations given by the mainstream press.[2] Haitians and Jamaicans should be opposed for "sociological or other reasons," not for being black. Whereas the dominant discourse stressed the white character of Cuban civilization, the

Afro-Cuban journal *Labor Nueva* ("Charla semanal," March 19, 1916) responded that the island could proclaim anything except being a "whites' land." Consequently, they argued that if permanent colonists were needed, then their race and national origin were unimportant (Dóu, 1916c; Urrutia, 1928).

BLACK VOTERS

In addition to Afro-Cubans' resistance and vocality, race was never to be silenced in Cuba for still another reason. Despite their reluctance to acknowledge the existence of a racial problem in the country and their perception that it was an issue that should not be the subject of political agitation because it could disrupt national life, dominant political parties constantly referred to race and racial issues, especially during electoral campaigns (de la Fuente, 1996a; 1996b; Orum, 1975).

The prominence of race in Cuban political discourse was due to at least two interconnected factors. Independent Cuba was the result of more than three decades of extensive cross-racial mobilization, in which black participation had been notoriously high. The presence in the liberation army of individuals labeled as "negros" or "mulatos" was heavy not only among the lower ranks but also in the officer corps, where it has been estimated at about 40 percent (Pérez Jr., 1983: 106). Some of the highest surviving officers of the army, such as Pedro Díaz, Agustín Cebreco, Jesús Rabí, Quintín Bandera, and others, were blacks. The new authorities had little choice but to recognize this fact, and therefore Cuba began its independent political life as a republic based on universal (male) suffrage, with about one-third of its electorate labeled as "colored." This proved to be a fundamental fact in Cuban social and political history: no party could win without blacks' votes, so each had to pay at least lip service to some of their grievances. That is why Cuban postindependence politics had, from the very beginning, a suspicious populist flavor. Victims of their own creation, political parties had to reassure the public that their main goal was to build and to consolidate the republic with all and for all, and thus the myth of an inclusionary republic also imposed limitations on the elite.

In the early twentieth century, this was a unique situation, at least among countries with a substantial population of African descent in the Americas. While universal suffrage was being introduced in Cuba, the Brazilian electorate was being significantly reduced. The electoral reform of 1881 and the Constitution of 1891, which created the oligarchic First Republic (1889-1930), restricted electoral rights to literate men, effectively barring most

Afro-Brazilians (and most Euro-Brazilians as well, for that matter) from the country's political life (Love, 1970: 8-9; Andrews, 1991: 43). In the U.S. South, the failure of Reconstruction led to the emergence of blacks as a disenfranchised class of laborers and to the effective control of the Southern ruling elite (Foner, 1988: 604-609). In Venezuela, the principle of universal suffrage established by the 1893 Constitution was restricted in 1901, and the rule of the caudillos Cipriano Castro (1899-1908) and Juan Vicente Gómez (1908-1935)—who modified the constitution seven times, always in a "regressive and personalist" way—effectively eliminated electoral competition from national politics (Lombardi, 1985: 217-220; Arellano Moreno, 1974: 390-431).

However veiled, the message of the leading Liberal and Conservative parties was always the same: all citizens were, as the constitution stated, equal before the law; they were neither blacks nor whites but Cubans. It was only exceptionally that a political figure dared to say openly that the republic with all and for all was, in fact, just for whites.[3] To be sure, political parties devised concrete strategies to reconcile this egalitarian rhetoric with practices that tended to minimize blacks' influence in public affairs, but the weight of the nationalist myth and the electoral strength of the black vote were realities they could not afford to ignore.

As the 1912 racist repression against the Partido Independiente de Color made clear, however, the dominant political parties were ready to apply the myth of racial fraternity only so far. The creation of an all-black political party put at risk not only their control over the black electorate but also the very viability of the raceless paradigm on which Cuban nationalism was being constructed. Afro-Cubans were demanding full participation in the economic, social, and political life of the country in a proportion equal to their share of the population and their contribution to the independence cause. The response of the liberal government and the conservative opposition is well known: the Independientes were massacred, and their movement was presented as a racist and unpatriotic act against Cuban unity (Helg, 1995; Portuondo Linares, 1950).

Liberals and conservatives succeeded in presenting the Independientes' revolt as a racially motivated uprising—indeed, the event was quickly labeled the "race war." This enabled them to create a unified white front, a clear violation of the nationalist inclusionary republic. But politics would break whites' unity almost as quickly as it had been created. In the elections of 1916 and 1920, the opponents of liberal candidate José Miguel Gómez would frequently remind the black electorate that it was under his presidency that blacks had been "assassinated," that he was "the man who ordered terrible and unnecessary killings of blacks" (de la Fuente, 1996a). In summary, if

white politicians preferred to avoid talking about race, the logic of the Cuban political system forced them to address the issue. Needless to say, this gave Afro-Cubans the opportunity to renegotiate their participation in the national life, and by doing so, they also maintained social and political visibility. Whitening had failed not only in demographic terms.

THE CUBAN RACE

If blacks did not fade away, their participation in the Cuban nation had to be rethought. By the 1920s, not only was the whitening ideal showing increasing signs of inviability but the whole republican order was in crisis. The political system had achieved neither peace nor progress. Significant economic growth occurred prior to the late 1920s, but its main beneficiaries were the U.S. companies, whose investments in the island had surpassed the U.S. $1 billion by 1921. In the 1920s, they owned from 55 percent to 80 percent of the sugar-producing capacity and no less than 15 to 20 percent of the national territory. Furthermore, many of the Cuban-owned centrales were, in fact, controlled by foreign financial interests. Politically, there was hardly any doubt that Cuban independence was, under the Platt Amendment, a juridical fiction (Trelles, 1927b; Pérez Jr., 1986).

By the 1920s, then, the deep crisis of the republic and the heavy foreign (primarily U.S. but also Spanish) presence in the country's economic, cultural, and political life had generated the need to forge a new national identity (Mañach, 1925; Ortiz, 1919; 1924). Cuban intellectuals embarked on a soul-searching exercise aimed at reconstructing Cubanness in the old inclusionary tradition—the republic with all and for all—but this time within a narrower nationalist framework: "all" meant Cubans and only Cubans.[4]

In their search for Cubanness, white intellectuals reencountered, as in the late nineteenth century, the blacks. If Spain had argued that independent Cuba was not a viable entity because of its "black peril," the United States and its ideologues had frequently voiced their misgivings about the capacity of the "mixed," "half-breed" Cubans to conduct their affairs in an orderly and civilized way. For some Americans, Cubans of all colors could, in fact, be described as "Negroes." As E. Hallman, a lawyer from Norristown, said, "American properties and lives are subject in this place to the laws, desires and caprice of a class of ignorant Negroes who are utterly incapable of governing themselves." Perhaps the most elaborate example of this vision was provided by a Virginia statute that prohibited access to official institutions to "Negroes, Chinese, and Cubans" (de la Fuente, 1996a: 169). To meet this challenge, Cubans had little choice but to come to terms with their own

racial diversity, hence the invention in the 1930s of the *Cuban race*, a new national paradigm that celebrated as its own blacks' cultural contributions to Cubanness. In the process, symbolized above all by the Afronegrista or Afrocubanista literary movement, Cuba was reconstructed as a mulatto or mestizo nation (Arce, 1935; Ramos, 1937). "Cuba's soul is *mestizo* (half-breed)," Nicolás Guillén (1972, vol. 1: 114) wrote in 1931, "and it is from the soul, not the skin, that we derive our definite color. Someday it will be called 'Cuban color.' "

The contradictory nature of this search and the uneasiness with which white intellectuals initially approached blackness is clearly perceived in some of the early works of Fernando Ortiz, one of the leading exponents of this movement. It is not by coincidence that Ortiz got into the study of Afro-Cuban religions through his interest in analyzing what he called "la mala vida cubana," that is, Cuba's criminal life. Both *Los negros brujos* (1917) and *Los negros esclavos* (1916) reflect this scientific interest in Cuba's "low" life. But he soon expanded his studies to the African influence on national culture (even if as part of national folklore)[5] in such diverse fields as music, dance, language, and cuisine. As Guillén (1976, vol. 2: 337-338) has stated, it is Ortiz's merit to have pointed to the role of the African component in the formation of what he called "an authentic, truly representative national culture." By the 1940s, Ortiz, whose works had been followed by authors such as Lydia Cabrera (1940; 1948), Rómulo Lachatañeré (1938; 1942) and Juan Luis Martín (1946), sustained that "without the black, Cuba would not be Cuba" (Ortiz, 1943: 258).

A fundamental change had taken place. In opposition to the early republic, characterized by the rejection and open repression of black cultural symbols as primitive and savage, an obstacle to the modernization of Cuban society and the consolidation of a national identity, by the 1930s, all these symbols had been incorporated as part of a new national paradigm that celebrated *mestizaje* as the very essence of Cubanness. The dominant discourse on national identity had moved from the racial multiplicity of Martí—his "Cuban is more than white, mulatto, or black"—to the racial synthesis of the 1920s (Guillén's "Cuban color"). It is true, as Vera Kutzinski (1993) has argued, that this incorporation was achieved through the commodification and folklorization of black culture, but the very recognition of Africanness as a constituent element of Cuban identity opened new opportunities for Afro-Cubans to claim their central role in the formation of the nation.

According to Kutzinski (1993: 9-13), "the evolving ideology [of mestizaje and Cubanness] . . . deracialized Cuba, thus further entrenching racially . . . determined social hierarchies." Thus, she portrays the Afrocubanista movement as "the site where men of European and of African ancestry rhetorically

reconcile their differences and, in the process, give birth to the paternalistic political fiction of a national multiculture in the face of a social system that resisted any real structural pluralism." But this "rhetorical" reconciliation of racial differences in Cuban culture provided Afro-Cubans with needed ideological tools to fight for equality and gave their claims new political legitimacy. It is clear that blacks' capacity to challenge the social order was limited by this nationalist discourse, but, like Martí's republic "with all and for all," the new rhetorical reality was an ideal that could be reinterpreted to their advantage. If social practices were in open conflict with this ideal, it was then legitimate and even patriotic to transform them, a process that would hardly "further entrench" previous "social hierarchies." As Ramón Guirao (1938: xv), himself a notable member of the movement, stated in 1938, the search for blackness "made us think . . . about the possibility for blacks to acquire their equality of opportunities" and recognized that "these incursions" had not "altered the social destiny of the black man." Equality of opportunities was increasingly understood, however, as the lack of economic equality—a construction that was just a step away from claiming that Cuba had no racial problem but only an economic one.

With the emergence of the new nationalist paradigm, even the denomination "Afro-Cuban" became contested. The rationale of those who criticized the concept was simple enough: if Cuban was already "Afro," then "Afro-Cuban" was a tautology. The popular slogan, *el que no tiene de Congo tiene de Carabalí* (those who have no Congo have Carabalí), summarizes this new view of Cubanness. And it was, curiously, one of the most radical Afro-Cuban intellectuals, Nicolás Arredondo (1939: 108-112), who first attacked the concept. "What is Cuban," he said, "contains in itself the African and black element." Blacks' presence in all walks of national life was so important, Arredondo concluded, that it was not possible to speak about Afro and Cuban as two different things. "Our geography, our economy, our history and culture have forged a type of man who belongs neither to Africa nor to Spain [but] to Cuba."

Although the new notions of mestizaje and Cubanness tended again to obscure blacks' peculiar situation in the Cuban social structure, race did not disappear from national politics. It is only on the assumption that black radicalism can be exclusively expressed through an all-black political organization based on a racial agenda that it is possible to say that the 1912 slaughter "signified the end of black Cuban radicalism up to the present" and that "never again were they [Afro-Cubans] able to create an organization capable of challenging the political authorities" (Helg, 1995: 21, 228-242).

In societies that are not formally segregated, however, political mobilization based on strict racial lines has been the exception rather than the norm.

This is not only because blacks do not form a homogeneous group in class and regional terms but also because these societies are not primarily organized along color lines and, therefore, are not divided into two racially exclusive sectors. Not surprisingly, in these conditions political activities seldom take the form of racial movements, and when they do, they frequently meet with little success (for Brazil, see Andrews, 1992; Mitchel, 1985; and Hanchard, 1994). In fact, the assumption that it is only through a racially exclusive organization that black radicalism can express itself is grounded in an entirely different environment: that of the United States, where desegregation was achieved as a consequence of extensive black mobilization. I do not deny that it is a useful and natural academic exercise to look for answers to U.S. social problems elsewhere, as these scholars implicitly do, but such an exercise runs the risk of uncritically applying to Latin American societies a set of questions and categories developed in the social praxis and the study of fundamentally different realities.

By the late 1910s, the black population was starting to suffer what would be a steady process of social fragmentation, and therefore mobilization centered on purely racial issues was becoming increasingly unfeasible. The creation of the aristocratic club Atenas in 1918 had a high symbolic value precisely because it represented the emergence of the new black middle class that, although speaking in the name of the whole "colored race," saw itself as and was in fact very different from the large masses of black workers, among whom it had limited support and whose day-to-day realities and needs it poorly understood. Not surprisingly, this social change was echoed by the racial terminology. The concept of a "class of color," a political construction that emphasized blacks' shared position in society, was under attack by the 1920s and virtually disappeared from Cuban racial terminology thereafter. By 1929 Gustavo E. Urrutia, himself a superb example of the new middle class, was explicitly challenging the concept and distinguishing it from an inclusionary "race of color." He wondered how could anyone say that "all the colored race belong[ed] to a single class." What we frequently perceive as black discourse was in fact black middle-class discourse.

Black workers' radicalism instead expressed itself in a cross-racial labor movement that, by the 1930s, was emerging as one of the main actors in Cuban national politics (de la Fuente, 1997; Carr, 1996). Under communist leadership, the labor movement incorporated racial equality as one of its programmatic goals, and therefore race did not disappear from public discourse. Quite to the contrary, it became a subject of heated political contestation, first in the formulation of the 1940 Constitution and later around the communists' attempts to pass a complementary law against racial discrimination (Fernández Robaina, 1994a). Although the communists' following

was substantially smaller than that of other parties, their control over the powerful Confederación de Trabajadores de Cuba (Cuban Workers' Federation—CTC) gave them a political weight well beyond what their membership would suggest. Such control did not go unchallenged, however, and most parties created their own labor sections in a clear attempt to attract workers' votes and to exercise some degree of control over the CTC. After the 1930s, it was the labor vote that all political parties were competing for, and Cuban politics acquired a definite populist tone.

Workers benefited greatly from this environment but not without a price. Since the alliance made between the communists and Fulgencio Batista in the late 1930s, the labor movement's influence over national politics increased significantly, as did its capacity to exact immediate benefits and favorable social legislation from the Cuban state (Domínguez, 1978: 87-90). That race differentials in earnings were negligible among industrial and agricultural workers by the early 1940s is a strong indication that unions had been at least partially successful in their antidiscriminatory efforts. As I have argued elsewhere, race made little difference among the poorest in society (de la Fuente, 1995: 156). At the same time, however, the CTC became increasingly dependent on the financial and political support of the state and for all practical purposes was, after the displacement of the communists from the national leadership in the late 1940s, a government-controlled organization (Pérez-Stable, 1993: 48-49). Although the noncommunist leadership maintained a nominal allegiance to the principle of racial equality and took some practical steps in that direction, the expulsion of the communists from the National Council of the CTC and also from the leadership of the Federación Nacional de Sociedades Cubanas, the main organization of the black middle class, which had also become increasingly dependent on the state and its support, was a major setback for the struggle for racial equality. The republic would never have an effective law against racial discrimination, not least because none of the major political parties wanted the communists to be the authors of such a popular measure. In any case, neither Batista nor the revolutionary forces that overthrew him in 1959 had to deal with an autonomous labor movement, much less with an independent black movement.

THE CUBAN REVOLUTION

Race did not figure prominently in the agenda of the revolutionary leadership that took power in 1959,[6] but their commitment to social justice would deeply affect relations between blacks and whites in the country. Institutionalized discriminatory practices were eliminated as early as 1959,

giving blacks immediate access to former private and racially exclusive facilities such as schools, beaches, and social clubs. Other redistributive programs, although addressed to the poor irrespective of race, disproportionately benefited the black population, given its high concentration within the lower strata of society. As a result of these structural changes, by the late 1970s, racial inequality had drastically declined or disappeared altogether in a number of crucial social indicators (de la Fuente, 1995).

Change was less pronounced in the area of ideology. After an initial moment in which Fidel Castro (Instituto de Historia, 1983: 393-399, 569-571; Castro, 1959: 62), Ernesto Che Guevara (1985: 46), and other leaders of the revolution, such as Raúl Castro (see Alvarez Ríos, 1969: 426), publicly campaigned against discrimination and for racial equality in all areas of national life, race lost visibility in public discourse and tended to be treated as a by-product of class divisions. On one hand, the African roots of the national culture were fully acknowledged, celebrated, and publicized as major ingredients of the national folklore in journals such as *Actas del Folklore*, *Etnología y Folklore*, *La Gaceta de Cuba*, and *Revolución y Cultura* and also through institutions such as the Conjunto Folklórico Nacional (National Folkloric Ensemble) and Danza Nacional de Cuba (National Dance of Cuba). Rogelio Martínez Furé (1963; 1979), Odilio Urfé (1959; 1960), Argeliers León (1964), and other scholars carried on the studies initiated by Fernando Ortiz during the republican period. On the other hand, the revolutionary government imposed its own brand of official silence on race. Beginning in the 1960s, the new authorities claimed that racial discrimination had been eliminated from the island. Racism was presented as an undesirable legacy of the colonial and "semicolonial" past, one that had been wiped out with the obliteration of "privileges" and class differences. In 1962, the "Second Declaration of Havana" categorically stated that the revolution had "suppressed" racial discrimination (Castro, 1967a: 68; Lockwood, 1967: 128; Carneado, 1962). Again, race was treated as a divisive issue, its open discussion as a threat to the ever needed national unity. The lack of contested politics, the permanent threat of foreign aggression, and the control of the media by the government did nothing but guarantee the conversion of race into a nonissue in Cuban public discourse. The government had "solved" the racial problem: to speak about it would only generate problems and create unnecessary divisions, a position close to that of the advocates of racial silence in republican Cuba.[7] Initial revisionist attempts to address these issues in the open such as those of Walterio Carbonell (1961) and Juan René Betancourt (written before the revolution but published in 1959) were, despite their significant differences, unsympathetically received and met with official resistance.[8]

If race became a nonissue in domestic politics, it was a major issue in the international arena. Cuba's domestic silence was matched by an aggressive campaign that, while praising the elimination of racism in the country, denounced the exploitation of colored peoples throughout the world, especially in the United States. The Cuban government effectively used racism as a political tool to discredit the U.S. social order and gave moral and political support to the black movement. Some of the main leaders of the Black Power movement visited Cuba and participated in official international conferences (Murray and Ford, 1969; Newton, 1968; Castro, 1961: 25-27; 1967b: 15-17; Bray and Harding, 1974: 701-702). The Havana-based Organization of Solidarity of the Peoples of Africa, Asia, and Latin America endorsed the colonial thesis of black America and called on its member organizations and revolutionary movements around the world to support "the struggle for liberation of our Afro-American brothers." The organization, moreover, devoted systematic attention to the evolution of the black struggle and considered it part of a worldwide struggle against imperialism. African-Americans were just "striking at U.S. imperialism from inside."[9]

This "internationalization" of the race problem, which expanded and consolidated with Cuba's military involvement in Africa, was, however, eventually to influence domestic politics. By the late 1970s, Fidel Castro (1981: 89-91, 106-107) was defining Cubans as an "Afro-Latin" people and justifying Cuba's military missions in Angola and other areas of Africa in terms of racial and ethnic bonds between the island and the continent. Just a few years later, in 1986, the Cuban Communist party openly acknowledged, for the first time since 1959, that the redistributive program developed by the revolutionary government might have left some areas of inequality untouched. Thus, in its Third Congress, the Communist party referred to the need to promote blacks to positions of leadership within the party itself and the government. What was proposed was, in fact, a variant of an affirmative action program: "The correction of historic injustice cannot be left to spontaneity. It is not enough to establish laws on equality and expect total equality. It has to be promoted in mass organizations, in party youth. . . . We cannot expect women, blacks, mixed-race people to be promoted spontaneously. . . . We need to straighten out what history has twisted" (Castro, 1990: 503; 1986: 18).

The issue, however, was short-lived in official discourse and soon lost visibility and momentum, perhaps because the Cuban African policy that had promoted this reflection had also disappeared. Official speeches, if referring to race at all, went back to the old silencing rhetoric: race discrimination is unknown in Cuba. But the economic crisis that has plagued the country since the early 1990s has produced, among other unpleasant effects, a growing social and racial polarization (de la Fuente and Glasco, 1997) that cannot be

ignored. This perhaps explains the recent surge of scholarship devoted to the study of race relations in the country (Fernández Robaina, 1994b; Menéndez Vázquez, 1995; Alvarado Ramos, 1996; Guanche, 1996; Duharte Jiménez, 1996) and the renewed attention race is getting from the government and the Communist party. The project for discussion of the Fifth Congress of the party in October 1997 asserts as usual that the revolution eliminated racial discrimination but calls again for an increase in the representation of blacks and women in the leadership of the government and the state (PCC, 1997).

NOTES

1. Afro-Cuban intellectual production throughout the twentieth century is indeed remarkable. For useful introductions and overviews of black journalism and writing in Cuba, see Trelles (1927a) and Deschamps Chapeaux (1963). The most comprehensive bibliography of Afro-Cuban themes is that of Fernández Robaina (1985).

2. At times, however, Antilleans were presented as honest, hardworking people. Also, Haiti was presented not as the savage and primitive country depicted in the mainstream press but as the first free land in the Americas. For a few examples of this contestatory discourse, see Levargie (1916) and Dóu (1916b). For an earlier attempt to vindicate the vision of Haiti as a pioneer of American independence, see Risquet (1900: 187).

3. General of the Liberation Army Francisco Carrillo, the governor of Las Villas, was one of those exceptions: "The Republic is of whites, not of blacks," he stated in 1915. But see the reaction to his statement, based on Martí's republic "with all and for all" in Andreu (1915).

4. This new elite nationalist discourse was also contested, however, particularly by the radical wing of the labor movement. In the mid-1920s the communist-linked Liga Antimperialista framed workers' nationalism in a different way: "Cuba must be for the Cubans. This does not mean hatred for the *foreigner*; it means hatred for *foreign capital*" (see Rosell, 1973: 108-110).

5. Ortiz was, in fact, the founding president of the Sociedad del Folklore Cubano and the director of its journal, *Archivos del Folklore Cubano* (1924-1930). On the purposes and composition of the society, see Morro (1923).

6. That race did not figure prominently in the documents of the 26th of July Movement does not mean that it was totally absent from its political agenda as is frequently asserted (see, e.g., Thomas, 1971: 1121; Bonachea and San Martín, 1974: 159). The movement's "Manifesto no. 1 to the People of Cuba," in 1955, called for the "establishment of adequate measures in education and legislation to put an end to every vestige of discrimination for reasons of race" (see Bonachea and Valdés, 1972: 270). Furthermore, in 1957 Frank País, the leader of the movement in Santiago de Cuba, appointed two scholars to study the race question to incorporate the issue into the program of the organization (Nicot and Cubillas, 1963).

7. Sutherland (1969: 169), for instance, reproduces the testimony of a black youth who asserted: "The problem in Cuba is that there is a taboo on talking about racism, because officially it doesn't exist anymore. And nobody . . . wants to talk about it." A visitor to the island (Evans, 1986) reported that discussions about racism were always "strained and tense." Indicative of this silence is also the banning of *PM*, a "documentary on blacks and mulattoes in Havana harbor bars" produced in the early 1960s (Johnson, 1993: 141).

8. Carbonell was ostracized; Betancourt went into exile.

9. These themes received ample coverage in journals such as *Tricontinental*, *OLAS*, and *Tricontinental Bulletin*, particularly during the late 1960s. Illustrative of this internationalization of the race problem was also Santiago Alvarez's 1965 documentary *Now*, which denounced racism and racial violence in the United States. For a few examples of this campaign, see "United States: Armed Confrontation," *Tricontinental*, October 1969: 31-33; "The Rebellion of North American Black People," *Tricontinental*, September 1968: 57-58; "The Tragedy of the Blacks in Newark," *Tricontinental Bulletin*, August 1967: 9-11; and González Bermejo (1972).

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