

CONFERENCE REPORT

Questions of Racial Identity, Racism and anti-Racist Policies in Cuba Today

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For the first time since the Cuban revolution began in 1959, Cuban citizens of all racial and ethnic backgrounds and politicians, including Raul Castro, are speaking out critically and hopefully on the issue of racism on the island. No longer rejected as a potential threat to national unity or a grievance manufactured by dissidents, Cubans both in and out of the government are drawing attention to this “unfinished issue” and discussing ways to deal with it. The problem has become increasingly urgent as the pain of Raul Castro’s economic reforms, especially the drastic cuts to government subsidies, falls disproportionately on people of color, those least likely to be cushioned by remittances from abroad.

The significance and challenges of racism in the Cuban national debate, including in plans to revitalize a failing economy and foster citizen participation in the country’s future, prompted the Center for International Policy’s day-long conference, hosted by Wayne Smith, CIP’s Cuba Project director, and James Early, director of Cultural Heritage Policy at the Smithsonian Institution. The conference, titled “Questions of Racial Identity, Racism and anti-Racist Policies in Cuba Today,” brought from Cuba as featured speakers Esteban Morales, a well known economist at the University of Havana and frequent writer on the problems of race, and Heriberto Feraudy, a former Cuban ambassador to various African countries, now president of the Cuban Commission Against Racism and Racial Discrimination. In welcoming attendees, James Early also pointed out the timeliness of the conference: The United Nations declared 2011 as the year to focus on African descendents worldwide.

Unequal Opportunities

A film on Cuban race relations, *Raza*, produced by the Cuban Centro Memorial Martin Luther King, Jr. in Havana, kicked off the conference, and vividly pointed out both the complexity of the problem and the freedom Cubans now exercise in speaking frankly about it. For years, racism was ignored, suppressed and never openly discussed. Now, general agreement exists that although there is equality under the



Emira Woods (left) introduces the first panel, including Esteban Morales (center)

law, opportunities are far from equal.

The film interviewed Cubans from all walks of life. Their complaints ranged from the nonexistence of blacks in hotel management to the disproportionate police persecution of blacks on Havana streets; from the lack of black TV shows to the absence of teaching on black culture and history in schools—and the effect of all this on black self-esteem. Stereotypes persist on television and elsewhere. A ballet teacher, for example, spoke of a general sense that blacks do not have flexible enough feet to become classical dancers. There was strong agreement in the film that the race issue must be debated openly. “We can’t discuss an integrated culture until this problem is resolved,” noted one interviewee.

Eliminate Ignorance and Promote Awareness

Moderated by Emira Woods of the Institute for Policy Studies, the conference’s first panel described the issues and stakes for Cuba. Introduced as a “bold, courageous leader,” Esteban Morales, author of more than 100 books and articles, many on racial issues, cited the two main positions that exist in Cuba today, both with similar objectives but radically different ways of achieving them. The first calls for a change in the political system, on the grounds that the Cuban leadership is racist and has not tried to solve the problem, nor has the ability to do so. The second, to which Morales subscribes, posits that black people have made many advances since the revolution and that further advances within the revolution are possible. “The idea that changing the political system will change the situation with blacks is not reasonable,” he said. “Where is the model? The Caribbean, Central America, the United States? No, we prefer to go ahead in our way.”

What we must do, continued Morales, is eliminate ignorance of the issue and promote an awareness that does not exist. Throughout the educational system, ethnic studies must be broadened to inculcate a cultural/racial identity, so that children are brought up to understand their roots. The race problem must be discussed in schools. “What does not go into school, does not go into the culture,” he said.

Although racism exists, in Cuba there is no apartheid, no racial violence. Blacks and mulattos have good opportunities, just not the same as whites. The Cuban revolution did not do enough to solve the problem, thinking it would disappear immediately with the abolishment of all racist laws when the revolution took power, said Morales. In 1962, Fidel Castro announced the problem was solved. But it is not something that can just disappear, the points of departure for blacks and whites are too different. By the 1980s, race relations had become a big unresolved issue.

In response to a comment from the audience about the difference between Spanish and English colonialism (“In Spain, one ounce of white blood makes you white; in England, one ounce of black blood makes you black”), Morales noted that while England practiced apartheid and denied slaves their language, religion and culture, the Spanish allowed slaves their religion and culture, and a person of mixed race could pass as white. Spanish colonization made for a “very big mix, a very big salad, inside the population,” he said. As early as 1527, slaves could buy their freedom in Cuba, and blacks and whites mixed quite easily. This attitude changed at the end of the 18th century when an increase in sugar and coffee production after the Haitian revolution brought many more slaves to Cuba. At times, there were more slaves than white people, fostering a fear of blacks. Starting in the mid-19th century, however, a very integrated culture began forming in Cuba, one that exists to this day, Morales said.

For Morales, the biggest challenge in Cuba today is getting people to understand that there is a race problem. It’s a problem of communication and perception, and requires open discussion. Government needs to lead—to take the discussion to every block. It’s made more difficult by the fact that, like all Cuban domestic problems, it has become an issue in U.S.-Cuban relations, as described below, and thus open to attack. However, Cuba must be strong to succeed, Morales said, and denying a problem does not make it go away. People who support the revolution have an obligation to criticize when they see failings. “We aspire to become better so as to serve as a

model for others,” he asserted.

A conference participant commented that what the revolution has done for blacks in 50 years is more than what was done over the preceding 400. Nevertheless, Cuba will never fully succeed as a society without addressing this most important problem, the subtle but pervasive racial attitudes that keep people of color from reaching their full potential.

In response to a question about affirming the Africanness of Cubans, Morales said a new course is being planned for schools in the fall that will do that, as well as answer many questions. “We don’t want to cause anxiety but to arrive at solutions,” he noted.

Remedial Actions

The next panel addressed the measures Cuba is now taking to further racial equality. Moderated by Mwiza Munthali of the TransAfrica Forum, speaker Heriberto Feraudy began his presentation by thanking conference organizers for an “historic opportunity to speak out on racial issues in Cuba.” A dozen years ago, he said, Fidel Castro began taking action on the issue at the behest of writers, artists and other intellectuals at UNEAC, the national union of artists and writers whom Feraudy’s Cuban Commission Against Racism and Racial Discrimination represents. The Color Cuban Project was organized to encourage debate and two years ago reshaped into the commission. Beyond debate, the idea is to identify actions. “Debate has already been going on for 400 years,” he noted.

The commission’s first initiative was a discussion on a popular TV show, Mesa Redonda. It broke the silence and was very positively received, especially by blacks, who were gratified to finally see the problem recognized publicly. Second, a day-long show on African descendents was aired, using a single family as paradigm. Plans for the fall include a TV channel dedicated to Africanness in Cuba.

Further, the highest levels of the Cuban government now include blacks and mulattos in unprecedented numbers. Of the 115 members of the Communist Party’s central committee, 36 are black or mulatto (31.3%). In the 614-person national assembly, 35.67 percent are black or mulatto. Some 45 percent of professional leaders are also people of color. But this is not enough to solve the problem, Feraudy said. “To get at its roots, education and training and strong leadership are needed. It’s a matter of changing highly ingrained attitudes.”

Now, one of the principal committees of the national assembly will take up the question of racism and promises an open discussion. However, there is still much denial. “People say we are all of mixed blood and they have a point,” Feraudy noted. “In Cuba what color are we talking about?” The census counts 65 percent of the population as white, but you can look around and see the reality. “And it’s true we have gone from inequality to near equality; the question is how to further reduce the gap.” Blacks have not yet reached the economic level they deserve. “In this battle, we do not now need a truce,” he said.

Feraudy quoted Karl Marx’s declaration that capitalism rose spilling blood—African blood—from all pores. This gives society an un-payable debt to Africa. Still, eurocentricism prevails worldwide. All that people see of Africa is hunger, AIDS and general misery. Its kingdoms and literature are little known. The African diaspora must do more to get out the word about the continent’s great historical and cultural assets.

In response to a question about the economic crisis and its effect on the race problem, Feraudy lamented that many of Castro’s social and economic programs to boost black opportunity have been suspended for lack of funds. He mentioned the disparity between whites and blacks in remittances received from abroad, as well as the hardships caused by the U.S. embargo, which affect poor blacks disproportionately.

The bottom line, according to Feraudy, is that the earlier romantic thinking that there is no race problem in Cuba has changed to public acknowledgment of it. Now the revolution has given space to a dialogue, and Cubans

must take advantage of it. In past years a conference such as this in the United States would have been shunned as another opportunity to attack the Castro government. This CIP event, he concluded, “is evidence we are moving forward. We are not speaking just as blacks but as Cubans.”

The U.S. Policy Equation

The conference’s afternoon panel discussed U.S.-Cuban policy and its relationship to the race issue. Moderated by Sarah Stephens of the Center for Democracy in the Americas, it joined Esteban Morales and Heriberto Feraudy with Julia E. Sweig of the Council on Foreign Relations. All strongly agreed that the United States must not interfere in Cuba’s race problem. “This is a very sensitive matter that has to be solved internally,” said Morales. The United States has used race in the context of the dissident movement, linking it to democracy/civil rights/human rights. Under the Obama administration, according to Julia Sweig, the \$20 million available through USAID for Cuba programs, while still devoted to regime change, is now focusing on more politically correct, leftist causes, such as LBGT, race activists and blacks with disabilities. Or, in the words of the U.S. State Department, “We will be targeting new sectors of traditionally marginalized civil society...to empower them and build their capacity.”

“What authority does the U.S. have to intervene in Cuban domestic policies relating to race?” questioned Heriberto Feraudy. “What will U.S. investment do? How many blacks in Cuba really are against the government? The United States insists Cuba do what it wants, forcing us into erroneous positions like asking for help from the Soviet Union,” he said. But Cuba could not accept the U.S. interference that had been going on since the Platt Amendment in 1902. In 1912 the fear of U.S. intervention resulted in a massacre of thousands of blacks and mulattos, who rose up to protest the killing of a group of 12 men working to organize a black political party.

If the United States wants to help blacks in Cuba, Feraudy continued, it should lift the embargo, which affects not government officials but the poorest of the poor. It even blocked funds for AIDS relief.

In the 1980s, said Julia Sweig, the United States began to shift its focus from Cuba’s international policies to its domestic policies, particularly prison conditions and human rights. Now Raul Castro has taken the spotlight off the embargo, contending that Cuba must solve its own problems, thus decreasing U.S. relevance. The concern is that the economic changes will cause racial inequality to grow. But there is no assurance regime change would help racism either.

On this and other issues, “the most effective thing the United States can do is stay out of the way—and create space for a more natural way” for the two countries to relate to each other, said Sweig.

Esteban Morales noted that the United States is losing the opportunity to engage with Cuba in numerous areas. Despite its problems, he said, Cuba has strong experience in science, medicine and education, which the United States could usefully absorb. Americans are often surprised to learn of the advances Cuba has made in these areas.

Not Normal, but Natural

In the final panel, Wayne Smith, James Early and Philip Brenner, professor of foreign policy at American University, reflected on U.S.- Cuban relations and the race issue. Smith noted that he saw the relationship develop first-hand from 1958, when he was a young foreign service officer at the embassy in Havana. He soon gave up on the U.S. government making serious policy changes because Cuba “seems to have the same affect on the U.S. as a full moon does on werewolves.” In recent years, Smith has organized CIP programs that work with Cubans on areas of strong mutual interest, such as hurricane preparedness and conservation efforts in the Gulf of Mexico. However, he pointed out, “both countries face racism together, and we should be working on it together.”

James Early thanked Wayne Smith for his efforts to find areas of compromise and to work “not toward normalization but a naturalness” in the relationship, a public space where Cubans and Americans try to solve problems apart from ideology. Early said that the strong response to the conference had given him hope for an improvement in race relations. He felt encouraged that powerful voices continue to speak out and that the Cubans had shown a readiness to frankly discuss their own problems.

Early concluded by calling on U.S. citizens to assert the country’s consensus on dropping the embargo. “It’s not our right to impose on Cuba or any other place what we want it to be.”

Philip Brenner pointed out that Cuba remains on the U.S. list of state sponsors of terrorism because even though it condemned Al-Qaida, it also criticized U.S. methods of dealing with Al-Qaida. The United States does not think Cuba has anything to offer us, he noted, and we take the attitude that “we are best and know best.”

A film on blacks in Cuba by Henry Louis Gates, Jr., concluded the conference. Cuba: The Next Revolution described the enormous influx of African slaves to Cuba—twice as many as came to the United States. Although historically Cuba was very racist, only eight years after the end of slavery in 1889, Antonio Maceo, a black man, became a general and a great leader in the war for independence. Even the Cuban revolutionary hero Jose Marti thought that blacks and whites had risen above racial division. The film also cited the 1912 incident in which Pedro Yvonnet and his followers attempting to establish an Independent Party of Color were ruthlessly put down, in an effort to satisfy Washington and prevent intervention. By the 1940s, however, racial discrimination was criminalized in Cuba. In an interview, the director of the national library characterized Cuban racial identity as like that of an *ajijaco*, a stew composed of many ingredients, each losing some of its flavor to make the whole.

In describing the difference between blacks in Cuba and blacks in the United States, Henry Louis Gates noted that Cubans say they are Cuban first, black second; Americans say they are black first, American second.

Philip Brenner made the point that race in Cuba is different from race in the United States, and we Americans need to understand the difference. He lamented that the United States is once again boycotting the U.N. Conference on Racism and Discrimination, citing anti-Semitism among participants.

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