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REVOLUTION AND RACE:  
BLACKS IN CONTEMPORARY CUBA

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## ABSTRACT

### Revolution and Race: Blacks in Contemporary Cuba

This paper surveys the controversy and available evidence concerning the current status of Blacks in Cuba and the changes brought about by the Revolution. The main thesis attributes the controversy, particularly as it has emerged among U.S. Black scholars and activists, to the different perspectives of Marxism and Black cultural nationalism. The need to develop an adequate theory and practice of superstructural transformations during the period of transition to socialism is stressed. The "relative autonomy" of the superstructure, with its own mechanisms of reproduction (such as family transmission, etc.), necessitates a frontal attack at this level. A survey of Cuban practices since the Revolution finds remarkable progress in all areas, when compared to the pre-revolutionary situation of Blacks, although the scarcity of contemporary as well as baseline data makes fully satisfactory comparisons impossible at this time. Racial discrimination has been wiped out, although prejudicial attitudes and the remnants of historically based differences have not been completely eliminated. The Cuban official position has rejected the open implementation of "affirmative action" or similar programs, and in general it has shied away from a direct attack against vestigial racism. The rationale for this position is the expectation that as the socio-economic bases for racism are eliminated in Cuban society, and as all discriminatory practices are also eliminated, vestigial prejudicial attitudes will disappear in due time.

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The analysis and evaluation of the present status of Blacks in Cuba are beset by a number of difficulties:

- a) The absence of systematic studies in this area, not just with respect to post-1959 society, but also in reference to the pre-revolutionary baseline situation.
- b) The complex and contradictory testimonies of many "experts," as well as of Cuban and foreign Blacks, resulting from the tendency of ideological commitments to color the selection and presentation of evidence.
- c) The lack of consensus concerning appropriate status indicators to be applied to a society undergoing the transition to socialism.
- d) The varying approaches to the "race question" which permeate radical thought, particularly among U.S. scholars; in other words, the deep contradictions between a Black nationalist or culturalist perspective and Marxism.
- e) The extant tendencies within Marxism to reduce racial problems to class problems (which is different from the correct assertion, both theoretically and strategically, of the primacy of the class struggle), and furthermore to reduce the latter to a question of legal property relations.

Race Relations in Cuba: A Mosaic of Views

Given the paucity of data, it is very common to present an unrealistic, "rosy" view of race relations in pre-revolutionary Cuba. The immediate consequence of this approach is to minimize the impact of the Revolution on the status of Blacks, because as the "baseline" information is distorted, the fair assessment of changes becomes impossible. In our view, the pre-revolutionary system of race relations in itself tended to minimize the level of oppression of Black Cubans and the barriers to social mobility which kept them, by and large, locked in their place at the bottom of the social hierarchy. The denial of the existence of race discrimination, and even the denial of race as a topic for civil conversation, were integral components of the complex set of informal codes and norms regulating race relations in pre-revolutionary Cuba.

Thus, the dominant ideology asserted that there was no major race problem in Cuba before 1959. This view is shared, even today, by Cuban-origin academicians in the U.S. They tend to emphasize:

- 1) Relative racial harmony in pre-revolutionary Cuba (when compared to the U.S.).
- 2) That racial prejudice and discrimination were confined mostly to the upper classes and that, to a large extent, they were a mimetic phenomenon. Thus Cuban home-grown racism is underplayed, and prevailing forms of discrimination were attributed to U.S. influence and Cubans' adoption of segregationist patterns to avoid hurting the sensibilities of their U.S. business partners and tourists.
- 3) The absence of legal discrimination in pre-revolutionary society, which is then equated with an alleged absence of institutionalized racism.

The typical position is perhaps best exemplified by Masferrer and Mesa-Lago:

In Cuba racial prejudice on the individual and institutional level has always existed to a lesser degree, both in scope and intensity, than in the United States.

The legal system of the Republic banned all institutional forms of racial discrimination at the beginning of the twentieth century, but subtler ways of discrimination customarily exercised against Afro-Cubans, mainly by the upper class, persisted. These racial prejudices and discriminatory practices were incorporated into the policies of social clubs and commercial establishments that catered to the Cuban high stratum and the American Tourist.<sup>1</sup>

With respect to the changes introduced by the Revolution, there is no consensus. Authors and visitors sympathetic to the Revolutionary government have tended to emphasize the achievements of the Revolution in securing equal rights for Blacks.<sup>2</sup> On the other hand, opponents of the Revolution and a number of Black militants, mostly from the U.S. and some of them residents of Cuba for more or less extended periods of time, have tended to criticize the Cuban revolutionary leadership for its alleged failure to deal with racism.

Domínguez and other liberal U.S. academicians have tended to emphasize the continuity between pre- and post-revolutionary Cuba with respect to race relations. For example, Domínguez asserts: "Cuban Blacks and mulattoes are demonstrably poorer; because they are poorer, they are more likely than whites to become sick. This was true before the Revolution, and it is still true in the 1970s."<sup>3</sup>

Amaro and Mesa-Lago, while recognizing improvements in education, housing, and health, suggest that "four aspects of racial relationships in revolutionary Cuba do not seem to have improved conspicuously: job distribution, black-white aesthetic standards, the preservation of an Afro-Cuban culture, and sexual relationships."<sup>4</sup>

Carlos More, in a long tract on racism in Cuba, condemns historical distortions in which the true role of Blacks in Cuban history remains unrecognized. He insists that non-Whites constitute a majority of the Cuban population, and complains about the alleged systematic exclusion of Blacks from the highest ranks of government, and about the debasement of santería (Afro-Cuban syncretic religion) and other Black cultural expressions.<sup>5</sup>

Robert F. Williams and Eldridge Cleaver, among other Black militant leaders, have also reported difficulties and conflicts in Cuba on account of "racism." John Clytus, an Afro-American who lived in Cuba between 1964 and 1967, has argued that there is racial discrimination in employment and that Blacks are underrepresented in the decision-making structures. He has also criticized what he perceives as cultural racism (Whites on magazine covers, etc.).<sup>6</sup> Eldridge Cleaver, however, in spite of his rather vicious remarks about Cuba, particularly upon his return to the United States in 1976,<sup>7</sup> has gone on written record with some significant statements which help to place in context some of the other militants' views on race relations in contemporary Cuba:

I'm not satisfied with anything that exists on the face of the planet Earth today. I think that in some respects the Cuban experience is the most relevant to our experience in the United States. . . And how Cuba has moved to solve this problem is very important. . . it seems to me that of all the White people that exist on the face of the planet Earth, the White people of Cuba were making the greatest efforts to do something positive about this. . .<sup>8</sup>

Depestre, a Haitian exile who has lived in Cuba throughout most of the Revolution, has written an impassioned rebuttal of More.<sup>9</sup> He admits that racial prejudice does not disappear automatically with the destruction of the capitalist infrastructure, but he

cogently argues the case for the real advances in racial equality which have been achieved in Cuba since 1959.

Elizabeth Sutherland has tried to present a balanced account of race relations in her report on a trip to Cuba. In brief she concludes that:

. . . racism as it once existed in Cuba had been wiped out. A liberation had taken place which no other multiracial society could match. On a second, deeper level, it was possible to conclude that certain forms of cultural racism still existed; that many Cuban Whites still harbored attitudes which bore a chilling resemblance to those of paternalistic Whites and sometimes outright racists in the United States. On a third level, the race situation in Cuba was to be seen within its Cuban cultural framework and its Cuban political context. One had to speak, finally about Cuba and no other country: a Socialist, Caribbean, Mulatto nation whose counterpart exists nowhere.<sup>10</sup>

Other highly nuanced accounts have been presented by Booth, Rout,<sup>11</sup> and Reckford.<sup>12</sup>

In summary, considerable controversy exists concerning the status of Blacks in present-day Cuba in spite of an official Cuban position which declares the problems of racial discrimination "solved." The controversy is undoubtedly related to different views of the evidence, which we shall examine, but it has to do more with the different perspectives towards the "race question" which are adopted by Black nationalists and Marxists. It is further fanned by the use of the "racial question" as a convenient ploy for attacks upon the Cuban revolution by its ideological opponents.

#### The Racial Policies of the Cuban Revolutionary Government

The main outline of the Cuban revolutionary government's position on the race question was unambiguously presented by Fidel Castro in two very early public appearances: his speech of March 22, 1959<sup>13</sup> and a televised press conference on March 25, 1959.<sup>14</sup> In these statements we find not only the main outline of the racial policies to be followed by the Revolution, but also clear references to the context within which this policy would be implemented, a context which established its scope and limits.

In an unprecedented show of bluntness, given the traditional Cuban conspiracy of silence about racial matters, Fidel started by recognizing the existence of widespread prejudice: "people's mentality is not yet revolutionary enough. People's mentality is still conditioned by many prejudices and beliefs from the past...."<sup>15</sup>

In his televised appearance, he further made explicit that racial prejudice cut across classes in Cuban society:

On this issue, to be fair, I must say that racial discrimination is not only a matter for the sons of aristocrats. There are poor people who also practice discrimination. There are workers which also suffer from prejudice...the absurdity, what must force the people to think, is that (the speech) has irritated people who do not own large tracts of land, who do not receive housing rental income; people who only have prejudices in their heads. . . .

And he even spoke of racial prejudice as a far-reaching wound which struck at the center of the Cuban sense of nationhood: "I have not dealt with this problem to open wounds but rather to heal the deep wounds which have existed, since centuries ago, in the core of our nation."

Discrimination in Cuba is seen as centering around two major areas: discrimination in access to jobs and discrimination in access to recreational facilities and cultural centers. The top priority of the racial policies of the revolutionary government is conceptualized as the eradication of racial discrimination in jobs, with the goal of assuring Blacks full access to employment opportunities:

One of the battles which we must prioritize more and more every day...is the battle to end racial discrimination at the work place... There are two types of racial discrimination: one is the discrimination in recreation centers or cultural centers; the other, which is the worst and the first one which we must fight, is racial discrimination in jobs...

But the roots of social prejudice are seen as related to the existence of discriminatory private educational institutions, which prevent the common access of all children to the same schools, where healthy and egalitarian interaction patterns can be established:

There is discrimination at recreation centers. Why? Because Blacks and Whites were educated apart. At the public grade school, Blacks and Whites are together. At the public grade school, Blacks and Whites learn to live together, like brothers. And if they are together at the public school, they are later together at the recreation centers and at all places.

However, the struggle against racial prejudice and discrimination by the revolutionary government must be seen in the context of its search for unity, for bringing together all possible energies in defense of the Revolution: "We are a small country where we need each other, where we need the efforts of everyone...but the Cuban people can only be united on the basis of banning all injustice."

The reactions to Fidel's 1959 speeches underscored the divisive potential of the race issue. Depestre has summarized the impact of Fidel's March 22 speech:

The speech...was well received by the majority of the white revolutionaries among the people... On the other hand, all the white bourgeois and the majority of the white petty bourgeois elements (and the well off mulattoes), even those which at that time would have still given their lives for the Revolution, became panic-stricken, as if the Prime Minister of Cuba had announced an atomic attack upon the island for the following morning. In the well-to-do neighborhoods of Havana, Santa Clara, Camaguey, Santiago de Cuba, etc., there was general uproar. The counter-revolution was horrified and it circulated the rumor that Fidel Castro has invited Black men to invade the country's aristocratic sanctuaries to dance and revel with the vestal virgins who, until then, had managed to preserve themselves from the terrible radiations which emanate from black skin... The volcano of negrophobia was in eruption... Very respectable white ladies left the country stating that, since Fidel Castro's speech, Blacks had become impossible...<sup>16</sup>

Fidel, after the reaction to his speech, became painfully aware of the difficulties involved. In his March 26 televised appearance, he stressed that "the problem of racial discrimination is, unfortunately, one of the most complex and difficult problems which the Revolution must tackle...." Subsequently until the mid-1970s, the Revolution would tackle it quietly through:

- 1) General redistributive policies which benefited primarily the Black population because of their concentration on the lower strata of society. In this category, were changes in health, housing, etc.
- 2) Policies directed against the bastions of class privilege in the old society--particularly the elimination of private social clubs and private schools, which meant elimination of discriminatory practices at these centers.
- 3) Policies specifically directed towards elimination of racial prejudice and discrimination, such as equality of access to jobs and eradication of the remaining instances of blatant segregation (such as separate walking paths in public squares--an old practice in several provincial towns).

However, the revolutionary government has consistently rejected any form of explicit race-based compensatory assistance or "affirmative action" plan. This has been a frequent target of criticism by Afro-American radicals.

The rationale for the revolutionary government's position has been that, given the egalitarian practices of the Revolution, and the general redistributive measures of the Revolution, historical differentials will eventually disappear. Also, the divisiveness which would be implied in any "affirmative action" program is considered a definite political liability. According to Rout:

A large-scale effort to provide compensatory assistance could (1) set Afro-Cubans apart, thereby emphasizing social differences; (2) anger white Cubans who would not favor special help for Blacks; (3) cost large sums of money that would normally be allocated elsewhere; and (4) erode the revolutionary government's credibility.<sup>17</sup>

On the other hand, it is true that the revolutionary government has implemented compensatory programs of sorts with respect to women and peasants. It could be argued that Blacks have been singled out for lack of special treatment. Programs addressed to the urban poor could have been instituted benefiting Blacks without fostering racial divisiveness.

The revolutionary government has also tended to avoid public discussion of the race issue, something which visiting Afro-Americans consider objectionable and evasive. But some Afro-Americans who have lived on the island, such as Robert Williams and Eldridge Cleaver, may not be exempt from responsibility for the Cuban "avoidance syndrome." The spread of U.S. Black nationalist ideology among Black urban youth, mixed with other imports from U.S. ghetto subculture (including drugs), was definitely intolerable to the Cuban regime: it represented a most perverse form of colonization without historical antecedents or roots in the nation's past.

The Cuban official position stresses the eradication of public racial discrimination and institutionalized racism. It is based on a traditional Marxist view which places the root of Black oppression in the Black's position within the process of production. It asserts the primacy of the class struggle and sees the elimination of racism as the inevitable and almost immediate consequence of the implantation of socialism.

Blas Roca, former secretary general of the Partido Socialista Popular (pre-revolutionary Cuban Communist Party) and now member of the Politburo of the Cuban Communist Party and President of the National Assembly, presents a cogent summary of the Marxist view of racial discrimination and prejudice in pre-revolutionary society and the changes brought about by the Revolution: racism is seen as a tool of the oppressors--the local bourgeoisie and the imperialists to which they were allied--in dividing and weakening the proletariat. Blacks constituted a large proportion of the reserve army of the unemployed which allowed capitalism to function in pre-revolutionary Cuba. With the establishment of socialist productive relations and the independence of Cuba from U.S. imperialism, racism has been eliminated.<sup>18</sup>

Carneado summarizes the official revolutionary view concerning the changes in race relations brought about by the Revolution. Revolutionary measures which have been addressed to benefiting all low income groups (urban reform, agrarian reform, low cost or free public services such as hospitals, education, public phones, etc.) have of course improved the standard of living of Blacks. Other revolutionary measures, such as nationalization of private schools and private hospitals, the elimination of private clubs, and the opening up of private beaches, had specific impact on race relations as they eliminated those pre-revolutionary social institutions which had been responsible for the most clear-cut examples of racial discrimination in pre-revolutionary Cuba.<sup>19</sup>

Fidel Castro himself has outlined his position as follows:

We believe that the problem of discrimination has an economic content and basis appropriate to a class society in which man is exploited by man. This is clearly a difficult, complex problem. We ourselves went through the experience of discrimination. Discrimination disappeared when class privileges disappeared, and it has not cost the Revolution much effort to solve that problem.<sup>20</sup>

Later he reasserts: "In Cuba, the exploitation of man by man has disappeared, and racial discrimination has disappeared, too."<sup>21</sup>

It can be argued that the Cuban revolutionary position is related to certain political facts (need to emphasize unity of revolutionary forces without potentially divisive racial questions, need to emphasize revolutionary achievements in the area of racial equality--important from both a local and international standpoint), but this position could also, at least partially, be based on an excessively simplified view of the relationships between the material base and superstructural realities.

#### Race and the Transition to Socialism

In the Marxist tradition, socialism was conceived as a transitional society between capitalism and communism. In the current usage, we speak of the "transition to socialism" to refer to the initial stages of this transformation. This is partially related to the controversies over the nature of "socialism" (whose transitional nature has never been universally accepted), controversies which are now further complicated by formulations which talk about the development of new forms of societies, neither capitalist nor socialist,<sup>22</sup> or the development of a "non-capitalist" road, beyond capitalism but not yet socialist--structures Bahro calls "socialisms as they exist in the real world."<sup>23</sup>

Whatever our views on these issues, it is clear that in Marx's formulation, the ultimate goal, the superior, last stage in the historical development of man, was the Communist stage, characterized--among other things--by real equality. The basic dimensions of inequality in pre-revolutionary society must be erased, and although the process is bound to take a long time, gross measuring rods must be developed to assess change in:

- Class differentials
- Urban-rural differentials
- Sex differentials
- Race differentials
- Manual labor-intellectual labor differentials

Thus the transition towards the new society, even during its first stages, must strive towards a radical transformation of human consciousness; and parallel to the structural changes involved in the transition (and inextricably bound to them) we find transformations in the superstructure, changes at the level of values, norms, attitudes.

In analyzing these processes, a few pitfalls are difficult to avoid:

a) Although changes in the superstructure follow changes in the material base, this relationship must not be interpreted in mechanical ways. It is commonly accepted that there is a decalage, a time lapse between changes in the economic base and changes at the superstructure level. What is not so commonly accepted is that the superstructure can be conceived as having a relative autonomy because superstructural elements can be independently transmitted by various socializing agencies. Even in the face of clear obsolescence and/or dysfunctionality, certain elements of the "old" consciousness can manage to remain with us for a long time, unless a specific, conscious strategy of transformation-addressed towards a "cultural revolution"--is formulated and followed.

The Cuban government's position has tended to minimize this relative autonomy of racial ideology with respect to the economic conditions which gave rise to it and maintained it. Therefore, no specific efforts have been addressed to uprooting the remnants of psychological racism.

b) From a Marxist standpoint, the primacy of the class struggle is well established. But this must not be construed to mean that all the other differentials need not be taken into account. Simplistic views of the class struggle tend to prematurely close the issue by reducing it to a question of property relations and the latter to a matter of the legal substance of property, when the true bottom line is the dynamics of appropriation and the control over the allocation of societal surplus. In a recent theoretical analysis of the "woman question," Lisa Vogel has pointed out that, within the historical tradition of socialism, two contradictory approaches have existed, one which identified the source or principal site of women's oppression in the family; and another which sees women's oppression as having its roots "in woman's place within societal production."<sup>24</sup> Vogel also discusses the "peculiar polarization between practice and theory on the woman question"<sup>25</sup> as practice is generally based on a rather limited reading of the social production argument while theory expounds a confused rendering of the family argument.

A similar situation obtains in the analysis of the race question, because two contradictory approaches are observable: one which attributes the roots of Black oppression to a specific racial factor, to the ideology of white supremacy (to which only a Black nationalist approach can be a real match), and another which places the source of Black oppression in the process of social production and which sees the ideology of white supremacy as being a derivative justification system for economic oppression which could disappear as soon as the objective, economic basis for the oppression of Blacks disappeared in the abolition of capitalism.

This has been further complicated by historical circumstances in many concrete situations which have made the Black struggle for equality identical to a national liberation struggle, with the subsequent tendency to fuse the "Black question" and the "national question." Furthermore, in many societies, such as the U.S., the concrete conditions of historical development have been such that two quite distinct cultures have emerged: 1) a dominant white culture, primarily the culture of the white bourgeoisie with some interclass and regional variations; and 2) a counterposed Black culture, originally a culture of resistance, which emerged from the slave quarters and finds modern variants in the worlds of the rural South and the urban ghettos.

However, it must be understood that the same or similar conditions do not necessarily characterize the Black experience in other, historically different, societies, either because of the existence of a Black majority or because of the emergence of a truly mulatto culture. Thus, while it is true that the Cuban government's position has tended to emphasize the class perspective in its formulations of the race question, it is also true that Afro-Americans, confronted with the Cuban situation, have tended to extrapolate from their own experience. In general, they fail to recognize the possibility which Cuba embodies: the historical prospect of a true mulatto culture, emerging from the blending furnaces of the independence wars and finally crystallizing in the process of redefinition of "lo cubano" (of what Cuban means) in the transition to socialism and away from cultural colonization.

#### The Present Status of Black Cubans

At any rate, the basic truth underlying the Cuban revolutionary position cannot be contested. If racism is defined as the subordination of one group to another for the benefit of the oppressing class, racism no longer exists in Cuba.<sup>26</sup> Any form of discrimination or segregation is not only illegal, but definitely rejected in the prevailing revolutionary normative system. Former enclaves of discrimination have been torn down. The present socio-economic system does not depend in any way for its survival on fostering racial

divisions or maintaining the Black populace in a position of subordination. And yet "the truth about Cuban race relations has several, co-existing levels, like an ancient city where archeologists uncover one settlement only to dig deeper and find another--and beneath that, yet another," in the words of Elizabeth Sutherland.<sup>27</sup>

Let us examine the record.<sup>28</sup>

### Impact of Revolutionary Redistributive Measures

There is clear consensus that the early redistributive measures of the Revolution (the two Agrarian Reform Laws, the Urban Reform Law, etc.) improved the status of Blacks, who were overrepresented in the lowest sectors of the population. Revolutionary measures tending to equalize access to health and educational facilities (developing a massive public health system with preventive emphasis, elimination of private schools, expansion and improvement of the public school system, expansion of higher education and school facilities associated with the work place) have had a special impact upon Blacks.

The most far-reaching measure taken by the revolutionary government (in terms of development of racial equality) was probably the elimination of private schools. On the eve of the Revolution, roughly 15 percent of Cuban grade school children and 30 percent of the high school students attended primarily White private schools. The crisis of the public school system, its lack of resources for effectively carrying out its teaching mission and its poor reputation, had led to a proliferation of private schools where the children of the bourgeoisie (and the middle sectors which could afford them) were educated with few contacts with the Black masses and other oppressed sectors of the population. This segregation of the elite had far-reaching consequences as it made difficult the development of social networks across racial lines.

The private school system disappeared in Cuba by 1961. Since then, a totally integrated school system has developed. Nevertheless, it cannot be said that the long heritage of segregation and the impact of differential social chances have been completely erased. Visitors (particularly Black American visitors, highly sensitive to these issues) notice underrepresentation of Blacks in high-powered schools (such as the Lenin Vocational School, where a grade-school average of 98 percent-plus is a prerequisite for admission) and overrepresentation of Blacks at the INDER (National Sports Institute) schools.

However, the revolutionary government has already taken certain measures (i.e., the demand for a geographical distribution quota in admissions to the Lenin school) which, although they are not specifically directed at achieving racial balance, will have an

undeniable effect in preventing this school from becoming an enclave of the Havana elite.

The entire situation must be placed in perspective; the high-powered schools serve a very small number of students, comparatively speaking. The bulk of Cuban students attend completely integrated schools where the races effectively mingle--from day-care centers to post-graduate education.

Other visible changes since the Revolution have occurred in housing patterns. No clear-cut and rigid housing discrimination patterns existed in pre-revolutionary Cuba, but Blacks in Havana, for example, tended to be concentrated in dilapidated areas in the central city (Los Sitios, Jesus María, Atares), the less desirable working class districts of Mariano and La Lisa, plus shanty towns such as "Llega y Pon."

The Revolution brought an immediate reduction in rents (50 percent), and eventually ownership of the houses was granted to the former tenants. Thus, more Blacks own their houses in Cuba than in any other country in the world. Yet the housing situation is very difficult for Blacks and Whites alike in contemporary Cuba because of the low priority given so far to construction of new houses--particularly in Havana--and because of the limited resources allocated to maintenance until very recently.<sup>29</sup> But new houses built by the micro-brigades<sup>30</sup> are being allocated on the basis of need and merit. The old mansions being abandoned by the fleeing bourgeoisie and petty bourgeoisie were distributed to the remaining revolutionaries and now it is rather common to see Black tenants in the formerly exclusive Havana neighborhoods of El Vedado and Miramar.

The revolutionary government has, furthermore, developed a comprehensive health care system in a complex structure ranging from sanitary posts and policlínicos (community health centers) to national hospitals devoted to even the most esoteric specialties. The revolutionary effort has been mostly addressed to redressing the urban-rural differentials which were so blatant before 1959 (when Havana, with 22 percent of the population, had 61 percent of all the available hospital beds<sup>31</sup>). The present health system consists of 336 policlínicos and 255 hospitals, with a total of 46,402 beds in 1974 (up from 28,536 in 1959); plus 22 blood banks, 96 stomatologic hospitals, 47 maternity homes, 35 laboratories, 10 biomedical research institutions, four medical schools graduating more than 1,000 physicians and 300 stomatologists yearly, and 34 nursing schools graduating about 500 nurses a year.<sup>32</sup> The new health system has particularly benefited the rural and urban poor.

Domínguez, after reviewing published public-health surveys before and after the Revolution, has concluded that racial inequality in public health remains a feature of Cuban life.<sup>33</sup> However, his conclusions are based on an alleged high incidence of disease among Blacks, particularly what he calls "diseases of poverty."

The evidence, however, is questionable. In the first place, what seems well established is an underrepresentation of Blacks in some of what Domínguez calls "diseases of affluence" (heart attacks, cancer, etc.). With respect to the so-called "diseases of poverty," most of the evidence presented by Domínguez refers to pre-revolutionary surveys. The second problem is that many of the surveys deal with small samples, and the representativeness and reliability of their results are problematic. The third flaw in the argument is that Domínguez is judging over-representation (or underrepresentation) of Blacks in terms of the Cuban population as of the 1953 census, which seems totally inadequate for evaluating post-revolutionary data of the seventies (see argument below).

With the exception of one survey of tuberculosis patients, most of the health surveys quoted by Domínguez would underrepresent Blacks or roughly approximate their proportion in the general population (if my estimate of 38 percent Black--including Blacks plus mulattoes--for the 1970 Cuban population is anywhere near correct). The most significant finding in Domínguez' review of health surveys is not discussed by him and had nothing to do specifically with race, although it says a great deal about public health after the Revolution.

Domínguez reviews 42 health surveys, 18 pre-revolutionary and 24 post-revolutionary. Among the pre-revolutionary surveys, 14 refer to "diseases of poverty" and only 4 to "diseases of affluence." Among the post-revolutionary surveys, only 5 refer to "diseases of poverty" and 19 to "diseases of affluence."<sup>34</sup> This reversal seems to indicate a major shift in the diseases widespread enough to merit the attention of public-health physicians embarked in epidemiological studies. And one which speaks very well of the general impact of the Revolution on Cuban health.

### Demographic Changes

An indicator of the changes in race relations transpiring since the Revolution is the accelerated process of "mulattoization" of Cuba.<sup>35</sup> Publications to date of data in the 1970 Cuban census--the only post-revolutionary census--have not included any breakdowns of the population according to race. However, the basic form employed by Cuban enumerators included a question about color of skin and four categories to be checked by enumerators from visual inspection: white, black, mulatto, and yellow.<sup>36</sup>

The exact reason for not analyzing the data by racial categories is unknown, but it fits well with the general position taken by the revolutionary government on racial matters: that the revolution is color-blind although the general impact of revolutionary changes (addressed to the improvement of the life of the masses and towards the elimination of class-linked inequities) should significantly benefit Black Cubans, as one of the most oppressed sectors of the pre-revolutionary population.

However, in spite of the absence of published information on the racial breakdown of the Cuban population as of 1970, it is possible to speculate on the nature of the changes. It is my estimate that the percentage of "non-whites" in the Cuban population should have increased from 26.9 percent in the 1953 census to a figure close to 40 percent in 1970. The basis for this estimate is in the following factors affecting the Cuban population since the Revolution:

1) The Cuban migration to the U.S. since the Revolution is primarily a White phenomenon.<sup>37</sup> Thus, the Cuban population of the U.S. "whitened" considerably in the intercensal period (1960-1970), changing from 6.5 percent Black (including both Blacks and Mulattoes) in 1960 to 2.6 percent in 1970. This suggests that almost all of Cuban emigrés to the U.S. during this intercensal period--half a million--must have been white. Thus, roughly 10 percent of the White population of Cuba (using the 1953 figures as a base) abandoned their country, compared to much less than one percent of the non-White population.

The differential migration of Cuban races is in itself an indicator of the impact of the Revolution upon the Black Cuban masses. The underrepresentation of Blacks in the post-revolutionary Cuban migratory wave is clear from U.S. census data and even casual observation of exile communities. However, different interpretations have been proposed to explain the markedly different migration rates of Blacks and Whites: overrepresentation of Blacks in the lower occupational strata of pre-revolutionary society and underrepresentation of these strata in the migratory waves (a "class" explanation); differences in the Black and White Cuban communities in terms of the existence of "networks" within U.S. society to claim persons still in Cuba (which is really a modified "class" explanation); social and political pressures exercised on Blacks not to leave the island (a specifically "racial" factor), etc. But it seems obvious that another specific racial factor--the improved life chances of Blacks in post-revolutionary society--has played at least a contributing role in the differential migration, together with the other above-mentioned factors.

2) Published information on internal migration and population growth by province shows that, in spite of a negative migration balance,<sup>38</sup> Oriente province registers the largest percentage of intercensal growth in the 1953-1970 period. This suggests that the rate of growth for the Black population must have increased faster than the equivalent rate for Whites, given the fact that the concentration of Blacks in Oriente province has been traditionally the highest of all Cuban provinces.

3) Another reason to expect that the Black population must have had a higher rate of net growth since the Revolution is the fact that as Blacks have been traditionally overrepresented among

the most deprived sectors of the Cuban population, the improvements in health care, reduction of infant mortality rates, etc., must have improved Black net growth figures.

4) The deep social transformation ushered in by the Revolution, including the elimination of all forms of institutionalized discrimination (separate social clubs, separate "walking routes" in the parks of small Cuban towns, elimination of private schools, etc.) has meant increased opportunities for mingling of the races, which has accelerated the process of "mulattoization" of Cuba.

#### Employment Opportunities: A Comment

The fact that racial data for the 1970 census have not been released (or in so far as we know, analyzed) prevents us from reaching definite conclusions regarding the employment status of Blacks.

As a matter of fact, even if the 1970 census data would have been so analyzed, we lack comparable information for the last pre-revolutionary census, that of 1953, which did not provide racial cross-tabulations for employment and other data. Only the censuses of 1919 and 1943, among Cuban Republican censuses, have provided data on distribution of the labor force by race and nationality.

Testimonies of witnesses vary, as indicated earlier. This author's personal observations suggest that discrimination in hiring and promotional practices does not exist. No special programs of "affirmative action" or "positive discrimination" exist. The opening up of educational opportunities has had a marked impact, highly visible, on Black access to technician-level and semi-professional positions. This is particularly true in nursing and health technology. In addition, Blacks seem to be quickly approaching a representative level in the professions, particularly medicine and law.

#### Blacks in the Political System

It has been argued by critics of the Cuban regime, such as More and Clytus, that Blacks are severely underrepresented in Cuban decision-making structures. These critics attribute such underrepresentation to racial discrimination. Booth, on the other hand, has argued that this phenomenon reflects "the bourgeois or petty bourgeois social origins of the leading cadres of the July 26th Movement and the near monopoly of top decision-making power still held by this group."<sup>39</sup>

Before engaging in any discussion of the possible causes of the phenomenon, it seems pertinent to ascertain whether the alleged underrepresentation exists at all, and if so, to what extent.

Within the Cuban political system, there are three sets of structures to be examined: the Party (the Communist Party of Cuba), the State (the elected organs of popular power), and the Government (the various ministries, state institutes, etc.). Within the Cuban political system, the primacy of the Party in terms of decision-making is unquestioned. The key Party structures at the top are the Political Bureau, the Secretariat, and the Control Commission, followed by the Central Committee.

In assessing Black representation in these structures, we are hampered by lack of information. Domínguez has estimated, by a photographic inspection method, that the proportion of Blacks in the 1965 Central Committee of the Cuban Communist Party was 9 percent. In his view, this does not represent an improvement over the proportion of Blacks in the pre-revolutionary Parliament (House of Representatives and the Senate) as of 1943.<sup>40</sup>

However, there are problems with the photographic inspection method as a tool in assigning racial categories. It is also questionable whether the pre-revolutionary Parliament is equivalent in power to the Central Committee. In our view, the Central Committee is a higher, more restrictive and "elite" (or vanguard) institution than the legislative structures to which it is being compared.

There is no currently available comparable data for the 1975 Central Committee. Thus, it is not possible to analyze trends over time. However, changes in the 1975 Central Committee were not so radical that a monumental change in its racial composition is likely to have occurred.<sup>41</sup> The 1975 Political Bureau consists of 13 members, of which three (23 percent) are Black: Juan Almeida, Blas Roca, and Sergio del Valle.

But it must be stressed that the Communist Party, from a Marxist-Leninist perspective, cannot and should not be a "representative" Party, as understood in the Western political tradition. It is a vanguard Party with specific leadership functions, and it must be proletarian in ideology as well as composition but not "representative" of the population in a demographic sense.

In societies undergoing the transition to socialism, the "representative" structures in a demographic sense are typically the elected State structures--in the Cuban case, the organs of popular power. These organs are structured pyramidally, from municipal to national levels. The National Assembly is the supreme organ of the State, with legislative and constitutional amendment powers. It meets twice a year. Between sessions, the Council of State, elected from its ranks by the National Assembly deputies, assumes supreme State functions.

Information on the racial composition of the municipal delegates in the 1976 elections has been published by official Cuban sources.

The data are reproduced in Table 1. Of the 10,725 delegates elected to the municipal assemblies, 28.4 percent were "Black" (including Blacks and Mulattoes).

In an as yet unpublished study,<sup>42</sup> an attempt was made to establish Black representation in the National Assembly. During the December 30, 1978 session of the Assembly, a sample of deputies entering the delegates' Assembly hall at the Karl Marx Theater in Havana was categorized according to color of skin by visual inspection. Roughly 36 percent of the national deputies in the sample were "Black."<sup>43</sup> Of the 31 members of the Council of State, five (roughly 16 percent) are Black.

In the present Cuban political system, the National Assembly is the closest structure to the pre-revolutionary Parliament. If this is a valid comparison, then the current level of 36 percent Black deputies would represent a four-fold increase with respect to the pre-revolutionary figure of 19 percent quoted by Domínguez. There is no structure in the pre-revolutionary political system comparable to the Council of State. We have no available information on the racial composition of the Council of Ministries. However, on the strength of the data which has been presented, Domínguez' conclusion that the Revolution has had "little impact in increasing the black share of the elite"<sup>44</sup> is, to put it mildly, hasty.

Domínguez has also attempted to estimate Black representation among the soldiers and officers of the Cuban Army by visual inspection of photographs published in Verde Olivo, the Army's news weekly.<sup>45</sup> He concludes that there is an overrepresentation of Blacks among the Army rank and file and an underrepresentation of Blacks among the officers.

The conclusions are questionable on several methodological grounds; primarily the problem of assessing race from observations of poor quality photographs (Verde Olivo is printed on newsprint toned paper).<sup>46</sup>

Thus, as far as we have been able to ascertain, Blacks have made significant strides, since 1959, in terms of their participation in decision-making structures (particularly in popularly elected structures such as the organs of popular power).

Inevitably, the top Party structures, in particular, are bound to reflect historical differentials, as well as particular factors in the history of the Revolution, including: traditionally strong Black representation in the leadership and rank of the Partido Socialista Popular (pre-revolutionary Communist Party); the fact that Batista was Black and tried to discourage Blacks from participating in Castro's 26th of July Movement on the basis that this was a "white man's" movement; Batista's many efforts to co-opt Cuban Blacks by following a demagogic policy toward Black social clubs

TABLE I

Characteristics of Delegates Delegated to Municipal Assemblies  
Popular Power Organs - Cuba 1976  
By Color of the Skin and Province

Province	Color of the Skin								Total Delegates
	White		Black		Mulatto		Black & Mulatto Combined		
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	
Pinar del Rio	746	81.26	158	17.21	14	1.52	172	18.73	918
Ciudad de la Habana	658	71.21	174	18.83	92	9.96	266	28.79	924
La Habana	697	82.19	131	15.45	20	2.36	151	17.81	848
Matanzas	696	82.46	87	10.31	61	7.23	148	19.53	844
Cienfuegos	364	83.10	42	9.59	32	7.31	74	15.89	438
Villa Clara	784	84.30	91	9.78	55	5.91	146	15.70	930
Sancti Spiritus	546	88.64	30	4.87	40	6.49	70	11.36	616
Ciego de Avila	436	87.02	50	9.98	15	2.99	65	12.97	501
Camagüey	586	82.53	83	11.69	41	5.77	124	17.46	710
Las Tunas	401	73.44	58	10.62	87	15.93	145	26.56	546
Holguín	805	79.62	189	15.73	47	4.65	206	20.38	1011
Granma	395	45.04	79	8.44	403	45.95	482	54.96	877
Santiago de Cuba	317	36.31	194	22.72	362	41.47	556	63.69	873
Guantánamo	205	33.28	116	18.83	295	47.89	411	66.72	616
Isla de Pinos	47	64.38	22	30.14	4	5.48	26	35.62	73
TOTAL	7683	71.64	1474	13.74	1568	14.62	3042	28.36	10725

Source: Computed from Informe sobre el desarrollo del trabajo de constitución de los órganos del poder popular, La Habana: Talleres del CC del PCC, Diciembre 1976, p. 33.

and associations during the 1953-58 period, etc. These are seldom discussed issues which still await serious investigation.

#### Changes at the Attitudinal Level

Even if we accept, as has been argued throughout this paper, that the Revolution has uprooted all forms of institutionalized discrimination from Cuban society, this does not imply that all forms of prejudice have been eliminated, or that the consciousness of all the people has been transformed. Privately, many white Cubans (and even some black Cubans) employ the old racist language. But now, there is social disapproval of public expressions of racist opinions, and the social system does not allow these private opinions to become translated into systematic discriminatory practices. As Booth has acknowledged: "...In the climate prevailing after 1959, state-employed managers and functionaries have been unable to practice open racial discrimination."<sup>47</sup>

However, the evidence derived from attitude surveys or interview studies is rather scarce. Torroella found little evidence of prejudiced attitudes towards Blacks in a study of Cuban youth conducted in 1962. For example, only 4.1 percent of the students expressed a belief in the inferiority or superiority of different races and nearly 60 percent stated that they would marry someone of another race.<sup>48</sup>

Fox interviewed a sample of 50 Cubans emigre workers recently arrived in Chicago. He found that white working-class emigres in his sample shared "the belief that there never had been racial discrimination in Cuba prior to the revolution."<sup>49</sup> Even Black workers found the discussion of race itself offensive and tended to deny the existence of discrimination in pre-revolutionary society. The workers expressed discontent with what was perceived as post-revolutionary "discrimination" (favoritism of Blacks, excessive emphasis on Black inequality before the Revolution and on Blacks' rights after the Revolution).

Thus Fox considers racial attitudes to be one of the factors leading to disaffection with the Revolution among members of the Cuban lower classes.<sup>50</sup> However, the attitudes of such recently arrived working-class emigres cannot be considered representative of the Cuban working class at large. Maurice Zeitlin, in his 1962 study of Cuban industrial workers, found that a larger percentage of black industrial workers (80 percent) than white industrial workers (67 percent) expressed support for the Revolution.<sup>51</sup>

Nevertheless, Fox's findings bear witness to the changes in race relations brought about by the Revolution: more open discussion of the issue: better opportunities for Blacks--perceived by the disaffected white workers as "oppression" of Whites by Blacks, etc.

In Zeitlin's study, "many of the workers alluded spontaneously to the question of Negro-White relations." Black workers frequently referred to the impact of the Revolution on race relations<sup>52</sup> in spite of the fact that the interview schedule did not contain any question about this issue. Their comments referred to post-revolutionary equality of opportunity, the Black Cuban's freedom of access to all social facilities, improvement in living conditions, etc.

The question of interracial marriages as an indicator of change in race relations has been raised by Booth, who sees this as the "most foolproof index of qualitative change in a color-class system."<sup>53</sup> There are no hard data to document changes in this area, but even Clytus (although he makes the remark in a critical vein), frequently observed interracial couples strolling in Havana's Central Park, which irked him because they were of the white male-black female variety.<sup>54</sup> Booth reported an increase in mixed couples as of 1975.<sup>55</sup> Personal observations by this author during visits to Cuba in 1976, 1977, and 1978 suggest that mixed marriages, particularly of the black male-white female variety, are noticeably more frequent now.

But perhaps the most dramatic indirect indication of attitudinal change is the following. The virulent reactions to Fidel Castro's March 22, 1959 speech on racial discrimination, have been discussed earlier. On April 19, 1976, in a speech discussing Cuba's participation in the Angolan struggle, Fidel could quietly assert Cuba's African heritage, declaring "We are a Latin-African people" without so much as a minor negative reaction from any quarter. It could be argued that this is related to current "repression" rather than to an attitudinal change, but personal interviews by this author, among people of various ideological positions, have failed to detect any reaction to this particular point in the speech (even among people who otherwise oppose the Revolution and criticized Angolan involvement).

Thus, twenty years after the triumph of the Revolution, Cuban people--White and Black alike--seem to have accepted Cuban culture as a mulatto culture.

#### Afro-Cuban Culture and the Revolution

Carlos More bitterly criticized the Cuban revolutionary government for relegating "Afro-Cuban culture and religion to the level of folklore" without according it the proper respect and importance.<sup>56</sup> What is the evidence concerning this issue? In the first place, it may be pointed out that some--admittedly few--Cubans would even object to the use of the term "Afro-Cuban" because they would consider it redundant--Cuban being already "Afro-Hispanic."

The Revolution has accorded a relatively high degree of importance to the preservation and study of African-origin religious rituals--mostly of Yoruba and Bantu origin--which are still to be found in

Cuba, although with a high degree of syncretism. These African religions merged in Cuba in complex combinations, and further merged with Catholicism to produce Cuban santería (cult of the "saints"). For a very different perspective on the "folklore" issue, the reader should consult the works of Fernando Ortiz, Lydia Cabrera, and among post-revolutionary researchers, Rogelio Martínez Fure.<sup>57</sup>

For a period after the Revolution, the Cuban Academy of Sciences developed an Institute of Ethnology and Folklore, now transformed into the Social Sciences Institute. Its journal published many significant, serious studies on "Afro-Cuban" religion. The rituals, legends, and sayings of the various African tribes which were brought to Cuba, have been painstakingly researched and reconstructed for performances by groups such as the Cuban Folkloric Ballet. The latter's presentations are considered genuine and respectful by Cuban santeros, who flock to its well-attended regular seasons.

Towards santería as a religion, the Cuban revolutionary government has adopted the same position which it has taken towards other religious manifestations: they are respected, and facilities are provided for the cult (in the case of santería, special food allocations are given for the rituals and ceremonial banquets), but they are not encouraged. It is expected that, in due time, these cults (as all other religions) will disappear. Active participation in the cults or in any church is a definite handicap in Cuban society. It would prevent one's admission into the Communist Party, but this is to be expected, given the commitment to materialism in the Party and its vanguard character.

The revolutionary government has been hostile to religious manifestations when they have directly opposed the Revolution (such as the Catholic Church during 1960-61) or when they have conflicted in an active manner with compliance to the law. For example, the Jehovah's Witnesses' difficulties with the Cuban regime have stemmed from their refusal to bear arms, to salute the flag, and to submit to certain aspects of medical care, all of which conflict with Cuban laws. In the case of santería, there have been earlier periods of confrontation, particularly during the 1969-71 period, related mostly to the general difficulties of that moment in the history of the Cuban Revolution, and to the association of some santeros with criminal elements engaged in black-market and other illegal activities.

But actually, criticism of the Cuban revolutionary government's treatment of "Afro-Cuban" culture and religion stems not from specific facts but rather from the perspective of Black nationalism which some Afro-Americans use in assessing Cuba. Extrapolating from the U.S. context, some foreign observers tend to see "black Cuban culture" as something different and separable from "white Cuban culture" and Blacks in Cuba as a national minority.

Even the old Cuban Communist Party committed this mistake once. In 1932 (and following a similar line held at the time by the Communist Party of the U.S.A.), the Cuban Communists defined the black problem in Cuba as a "national" question and proposed black self-determination and creation of an independent black territory in the so-called "black belt" of Oriente Province.<sup>58</sup> But this Party position was "neither accepted nor understood by the majority of the people and furthermore, in the brief period when it was proposed by the Party, it only served to create confusion and deviate the struggle for effective equality between Blacks and Whites while people engaged in Bizantine discussions..."<sup>59</sup>

In the Sixth Plenum of the Central Committee of the Cuban Communist Party, in 1935, the "self-determination" position was officially rejected. The Cuban Party understood that this was an artificial position, transplanted from an alien context, which was "in contradiction with the whole historical process of the formation of the Cuban nation as a nation of Blacks and Whites, particularly since the 1868 Revolution."<sup>60</sup>

And in this comment Grobart really addressed the crux of the matter. Because in 1868, while the U.S. had recently finished fighting a bloody civil war, close to the core of which was the "Black question," Cubans (in an unlikely mixture of white landowners and black ex-slaves) were fighting together for Cuba's national independence from Spain.

There was a moment in Cuban history, during the early half of the nineteenth century, when the historical possibility of two Cuban cultures existed, as the white creole culture and the black culture of resistance were developing in separate ways. But the second half of the century and the Black role in achieving Cuban independence changed the historical course. Blacks not only provided the majority of the rank and file of the Liberation Army, fighting for their own personal freedom as well as the independence of Cuba. They also constituted a significant percentage (about 40 percent) of the officer corps. The Cuban independence struggle involved a real mass movement, and could be considered the first modern war of liberation<sup>61</sup> with guerrilla tactics and even the invention of counterinsurgency strategies such as the "strategic hamlet" concept. Thus, the Cuban white creoles, unlike so many of their counterparts in the South American continent, could not ignore the Blacks and attempt to maintain slavery and the old system of privilege.<sup>62</sup>

Equality and unity of the races in the struggle was one of the principal themes in the speeches and writings of Jose Marti, the Cuban hero of the 1895 war against the Spaniards. Spanish propaganda tried to alienate whites from the independence struggle by agitating the spectre of Cuba as a possible new Haiti.

This does not mean that Cuban Blacks achieved equality with independence. The Cuban bourgeoisie, which failed in so many of its historical tasks (including its own development as a national bourgeoisie), also failed in the enterprise of creating a true national identity which would have accepted lo cubano como lo mulato, that is to say, the mulatto character of Cuban nationality.

The final recognition and acceptance of this view of Cuban culture had to wait, fittingly, for the success of the socialist revolution.

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<sup>60</sup>Ibid.

<sup>61</sup>Robin Blackburn, "Prologue to the Cuban Revolution," New Left Review, October 1973, pp. 52-91.

<sup>62</sup>See José Luciano Franco, "El negro en la lucha por la independencia de América," in J.L. Franco, La diáspora africana en el Nuevo Mundo (La Habana: Editorial de Ciencias Sociales, 1975), pp. 409-425.