

Recreating Racism: Race and Discrimination in Cuba's "Special Period"

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“Race,” an Afro-Cuban-American businessman wrote in the Miami press not long ago, “is at the heart of Cuba’s crisis.” Although statements like this are not unheard-of, most analyses of the Cuban transition or the so-called “Special Period” treat the country as if it were a racially homogenous entity. A candid discussion of race is generally unwelcome among Cubans, particularly among white Cubans, who frequently claim that racism has never been a problem on the island and that its open discussion will only serve the divisionist purposes of the enemy, however defined.

In addition to this “patriotic silence,” studies about current social problems in the island face a total inadequacy of sources. Those sources that do exist are seldom published or accessible to researchers. The literature about the transition concentrates overwhelmingly, as a result, on economic and political problems, while the social dimension remains under-explored.

Is race truly central to the current crisis and, if so, what does that mean precisely? Does it mean that a collapse of the current system would lead to racial confrontation—even to racial warfare analogous to the ethnic conflicts that have plagued Eastern Europe? Is it possible to detect in Cuba some correlation between racial identity and political preference? Do white and non-white Cubans sustain conflicting views of how the future Cuba should be?

These are some of the questions addressed and discussed in this paper, within the limitations imposed by the dearth of reliable data. This contribution seeks to review the prevalent ideas on the subject, summarize the information available, and assess the impact of the current crisis on race relations in Cuba. In no sense does the paper predict future events or the way in which they will affect Cuba’s racial groups.

RACE AND POLITICS

Those who consider race to be at the core of the Cuban crisis often claim that Afro-Cubans provide unconditional political support to the government. Implicit in this construct is the belief that white Cubans desire change more than do blacks and mulattoes. As a headline by a prominent African-American journalist from the *Washington Post* puts it, “Black Cubans Prefer Castro To U.S. Rhetoric.” A Western diplomat based in Havana agrees: The situation will not change, he asserts, unless “the blacks start throwing rocks.” Afro-Cubans are thus supposed to be Fidel Castro’s “secret weapon,” a group whose loyalty is crucial for the survival of the current regime.

Their support, in turn, is explained as a function of two factors: the opportunities and benefits that the Revolution provided them and the fear that the regime’s collapse would imply the restoration of racism, which is frequently tied to the return of the predominantly white exile community. “That’s why there is paralysis in Cuba,” a State Department analyst explains. “When Cubans look at white, right-wing Miami, they are afraid.”

These opinions rest on a number of assumptions which remain, for the most part, unverified. Not only are blacks assumed to be the main beneficiaries of socialism, but whatever opportunities were created under the Revolution are assumed to be meaningful today, four decades after its triumph and under the conditions of the “Special Period.” Furthermore, racism and discrimination are assumed to be a future

possibility, not a current reality. It is also taken for granted that the Cuban-American community is racist, that blacks on the island fully accept this notion, and that they are politically paralyzed as a result. Does the available evidence support these assumptions?

INCREASING EQUALITY THROUGH THE 1980s

Only in part. It is possible, for instance, to empirically verify that Afro-Cubans benefitted under the 1959 Revolution. The revolutionary government never specifically targeted blacks in its social policies, but its program of structural transformations, aimed at improving the lot of the poor and working class, created opportunities for social mobility that were readily seized by the black population.

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The emigration of vast sectors of the white middle and upper classes facilitated this process, creating an occupational vacuum that was filled by sectors of the population which traditionally had been under-represented in the higher echelons of the occupational structure. Upward mobility was achieved without the social tensions which are generated by competition for scarce resources and lucrative employment. Through the 1970s, the need for professionals, technicians, and qualified workers was greater than their availability.

In addition, the class-based nature of the government's program of social transformation tended to minimize racial tensions and the possibility of racial conflict. The visibility and social relevance of race were further eroded in public discourse echoing José Martí's assertion that among "real" Cubans there were neither blacks nor whites, only Cubans. The government linked racism to a past that was being transformed and to social groups that were being destroyed. Racial discrimination was identified with imperialism, capitalism, and the white elite-enemies of the Revolution and representatives of U.S. interests. Manifestations of racism became socially unacceptable: They were both anti-national and counter-revolutionary. Race itself disappeared from public political discourse, mentioned only in regard to developments in other countries. Revolutionary Cuba was envisioned as a raceless society, one in which the color of one's skin would have no influence on one's opportunities.

This was not merely rhetoric. For the most part, the government's social policies were color-blind and did open significant opportunities for all sectors of the population, regardless of race. The results of this process of social transformation can only be described as impressive. By the early 1980s Cuban society had made remarkable progress in the reduction of racial inequality in a number of crucial areas, including

education, health care, and the occupational structure. Racial inequality persisted in some areas, but the trend was unequivocally towards equality.

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The Revolution's impact on racial equality and the singularity of the Cuban case can be understood better in comparative perspective. (Another possibility is to use pre-revolutionary figures as a reference, but these are not always available.) Using census figures, one can compare a number of indicators for Cuba, Brazil, and the United States—thus placing the Cuban figures in a wider context. For instance, by 1981, not only was life expectancy in Cuba close to that of developed countries, but this figure was as meaningful for whites as it was for blacks and mulattoes. Although a white/non-white gap of one year still existed, that figure is significantly lower than for Brazil (6.7 years) or the United States (6.3 years). Since life expectancy reflects a broad array of social conditions, including access to nutrition, health care, pre-natal care, and education, these differences are significant.

This is true for educational achievement as well. Illiteracy was basically eliminated on the island in the early 1960s, but by 1981 inequality in formal education had disappeared as well, through the university level. The proportion of blacks and mulattoes who had graduated from high school was in fact higher than the proportion of whites. Conversely, in the United States (at the college level) and in Brazil, in both high school and college graduation statistics, large racial disparities remained (see Table 1).

TABLE 1: PERCENTAGE OF HIGH SCHOOL OR COLLEGE GRADUATE POPULATION, AGED 25 OR OVER, BY RACE: BRAZIL, CUBA AND THE UNITED STATES, 1980s.

	WHITES (W)	BLACKS (B)	MULATTOES (M)	DIFFERENCES	
				W-B	W-M
Brazil (1987)					
High School	13.9	5.3	8.0	8.6	5.9
College	9.2	1.0	2.0	8.2	7.0
Cuba (1981)					
High School	9.9	11.2	9.6	-1.3	0.3
College	4.4	3.5	3.2	0.9	1.2
U.S. (1987)					
High School	56.4	52.8	—	3.6	—
College	20.5	10.7	—	9.8	—

Sources: Cuba: Comité Estatal de Estadísticas (CEE), *Censo de población y viviendas 1981*, República de Cuba. 16 vols. (Havana, 1983), XVI:2, 67-70; Brazil and the United States: George Reid Andrews, "Racial Inequality in Brazil and the United States: A Statistical Comparison," *Journal of Social History*, 26:2 (Winter 1992), 229-63.

TABLE 2: PERCENTAGE DISTRIBUTION, CIVILIAN LABOR FORCE BY RACE: BRAZIL, CUBA AND THE UNITED STATES, 1980s.

	BRAZIL			CUBA			UNITED STATES	
	White	Black	Mulatto	White	Black	Mulatto	White	Black
Professional	9.0	2.5	3.8	22.2	22.1	22.9	15.5	11.2
Administration	16.7	4.2	6.7	12.8	7.1	8.7	27.9	22.3
Sales	9.0	4.0	6.5	6.4	6.9	6.5	10.5	5.0
Non-agricultural manual	26.0	27.9	25.6	23.1	29.2	24.2	31.7	37.1
Service	10.7	22.6	13.0	7.3	9.4	8.6	11.4	22.3
Agriculture	22.7	31.5	38.6	18.2	12.9	18.3	2.8	2.0
Other/Unknown	6.0	7.2	5.8	10.0	12.4	10.8	0.0	0.1
Index of Dissimilarity	—	23.9	18.3	—	11.1	4.1	—	16.3

Sources: Cuba: Comité Estatal de Estadísticas (CEE) *Censo de población y viviendas 1981; La población de Cuba según el color de la piel* (Havana, 1985), 117-18. Brazil and the United States: George Reid Andrews, "Racial Inequality in Brazil and the United States: A Statistical Comparison," *Journal of Social History* 26:2 (Winter 1992), 249-50.

Following an understandable time lag, the expansion and socialization of education eventually influenced the racial composition of the occupational structure. As Table 2 shows, the index of dissimilarity (a summary measure of inequality) in the Cuban labor market was, in the early 1980s, three to four times lower than in the United States or Brazil. The proportion of blacks and mulattoes employed as professionals (one-fifth of the labor force) was virtually identical to that of whites on the island, whereas in Brazil it was three times lower. Thirty-one percent of workers employed in the Cuban medical sector were blacks and mulattoes, a proportion only slightly lower than their share of the population (34 percent, according to the 1981 census).

Nonetheless, the racial distribution across different occupations was still somewhat unequal. Although blacks and mulattoes were not greatly over-represented in blue-collar jobs (35 percent), their proportion in some sectors, such as construction (41 percent), was larger than their population share. Likewise, whereas 13 percent of whites worked in managerial positions, the proportion of blacks (7 percent) and mulattoes (9 percent) was lower.

Even taking these qualifications into account, however, the incidence of racial disparity in the Cuban labor market was limited, particularly in the case of mulattoes. Furthermore, since these figures are not age-specific, at least part of the remaining differences could be attributed to the legacy of past discrimination.

Even in the area of black representation in leadership positions—an area in which the Cuban government has been frequently criticized—inequality had decreased significantly. According to a census con-

ducted in 1986, 27 percent of management positions in the government at the national level were occupied by blacks and mulattoes, a percentage only slightly lower than their proportion in the total population. A similar distribution was found at the provincial and municipal levels (see Table 3). These figures represented an improvement compared to 1981, probably due in part to Fidel Castro's directive, issued during the Third Congress of the Cuban Communist Party, that the representation of blacks, women, and youth should be increased in positions of command within the party and the government. However, even in 1981, preceding that directive, the proportion of blacks and mulattoes among those classified as *dirigentes* (individuals in authority positions of various

TABLE 3: PERCENTAGE DISTRIBUTION, MANAGERS (DIRIGENTES DE ESTABLECIMIENTOS) IN GOVERNMENT ESTABLISHMENTS, BY RACE: CUBA, 1987.

Level	White	Black	Mulatto
Municipal	71.9	12.1	16.0
Provincial	73.8	10.9	15.3
National	72.7	12.7	14.6
Total	72.5	12.1	15.4
Percentage of adult population	66.1	12.0	21.9
Index of representation	110	101	70

Source: Cuba, Comité Estatal de Estadísticas (CEE), *Censo nacional de cuadros del estado. Dirigentes de establecimientos, resumen nacional 1987*, 5 vols. (Havana, 1987), 5: 126-29.

kinds, lit. management/leadership) was not negligible (24 percent).

The favorable impact of the Cuban Revolution on race relations in the country has been acknowledged by most visitors and residents on the island alike. "I'm black, I'm 51 years old, and I could go to school for free," a black female dental hygienist living in Havana declared in 1993. "My niece is very bright. She goes to a special school where the intellectual level is very high. But she is black, and she is the daughter of a worker." An African-American scholar who visited the island the same year concurred: "Cuba, while not a racial utopia, is as close to a racial democracy as we have on this earth."

A survey conducted in 1994 . . . found that 90 percent of Cubans believe that skin color does not significantly affect opportunities, nor the way people are treated.

Such anecdotes are not exceptional. A survey conducted in 1994 by CID-Gallup, a Costa Rican firm associated with the Gallup Organization, found that 90 percent of Cubans believe that skin color does not significantly affect opportunities. Ninety-four percent "believe that persons of color have the same access as whites to a good education," and a similar proportion agreed that they have equal opportunities to get "a good job" (90 percent) or "a position in society" (91 percent). In a survey conducted by a research team from the Cuban Center of Anthropology in three Havana neighborhoods in 1995, 81 percent of white and 73 percent of black and mulatto respondents agreed that significant progress had been made in the area of racial discrimination under the Revolution. A parallel study conducted in Santa Clara by sociologist Daniela Hernández the same year offered similar results: 94 percent of whites and 83 percent of blacks agreed with the same proposition.

Given the level of equality and effective racial integration that Cuban society had achieved by the mid-1980s, one would expect that the economic crisis which followed would not have had racially specific effects. In a truly color-blind environment, the relatively equal distribution of whites and non-whites in the socioeconomic structure should have guaranteed color-blind impact of market forces. Individuals would be affected according to their position in society and employment, regardless of race. Yet the effects of the "Special Period" have not been evenly distributed among racial groups.

REMAINING INEQUALITIES THROUGH THE 1980s

Despite the improvements mentioned above, certain structural conditions foreshadowed the unequal racial effect that the economic crisis would

have. Racial inequality had been greatly reduced in areas in which overall government performance had been strong: health care, education, and employment. In areas of limited success, however, racial inequality remained much wider.

For instance, a strong correlation between race, the regional distribution of the population, and the quality of the housing stock persisted through the 1980s. The historical geography of race and poverty was never dismantled, not least because of the government's failure to provide adequate housing to the population in general. No neighborhood was racially exclusive, but in the most dilapidated areas of the big cities the number of black and mulatto residents remained disproportionately high.

In Havana, the municipalities of Habana Vieja and Centro Habana exemplify the persistence of these residential patterns. According to the 1981 Cuban Census, blacks and mulattoes represented 36 percent of the city's population in 1981, but they amounted to 44 and 47 percent of the residents in the aforementioned municipalities. Whereas 13 percent of city residents lived in tenement houses, their proportion in Habana Vieja and Centro Habana was three to four times higher. These municipalities contained 47 percent of the houses in the city with significant structural damage. The proportion of houses with collective sanitary facilities was also three to four times higher in Habana Vieja (36 percent) and Centro Habana (24 percent) than in Havana as a whole (9 percent). In addition, households in these municipalities ranked consistently lower than the provincial average in the availability of basic household appliances.

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These residential areas, characterized by a high density of non-white residents and a physically deteriorated environment, have statistically high rates of criminal activity. Thus there is also a geography of crime which remains tied to race and poverty. Thirty-one percent of the areas officially classified by the National Revolutionary Police (Policía Nacional Revolucionaria [PNR]) as "crime zones" (*focos delictivos*) in Havana in 1987 were located in the three municipalities with the highest proportions of blacks and mulattoes in the city (Habana Vieja, Centro Habana, and Marianao) although these comprised only 20 percent of the city's total population. These "crime zones" included various shanty towns in Marianao and tenement houses in Centro Habana and Habana Vieja.

The persistence of racial inequality in the criminal system and the correlation between race and crime

are manifested in other statistics as well. According to a Ministry of Interior (Ministerio del Interior [MININT]) report, the average annual number of criminal acts between the periods of 1976-1980 and 1981-1985 increased nationally by 11 percent. The rate of increase in some of the provinces with a large black and mulatto population was significantly higher: 57 percent in Granma, 29 percent in Santiago de Cuba, and 50 percent in Guantanamo. In the same period, the annual number of murders increased by 46 percent nation-wide, whereas the figure in the three aforementioned provinces amounted to 70 percent.

Anecdotal reports also indicate that blacks and mulattoes are over-represented in the prison population. According to an organization of political prisoners in the Combinado del Este prison, in the late 1980s eight out of every ten prisoners were black. A U.N. delegation that visited two Cuban prisons in 1988 reported that "a large number of prisoners were black," a reality acknowledged by the Vice President of the Council of State who accompanied the visitors. The official explained that the number of blacks in prison was disproportionate in relation to their population share because, despite "the substantial achievements of the Revolution," blacks were still the majority in the poorest strata of society. This, he claimed, "is by no means the expression of a policy of racial discrimination, but a remnant of the past." Whatever the explanation, it seems safe to state that blacks' delinquency rates remained higher than those of whites through the 1980s.

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A provision in the penal code that is particularly indicative of racialized perceptions of crime is *peligrosidad social* (social dangerousness). It appeared in the Cuban criminal code of 1936 to provide for the prosecution of individuals with "a certain unhealthy, congenital or acquired predisposition" to commit crimes. The 1979 Penal Code somewhat modified the legal definition of dangerousness but still allowed for the punishment (including reeducation through incarceration) of individuals with "a special proclivity" to commit crimes. In other words, a person whose conduct was deemed to be "manifestly against the norms of socialist morality" could be deprived of freedom even without committing acts defined as criminal under the law. Included among these pre-criminal behaviors were habitual drunkenness, vagrancy, drug addiction, and other forms of "antisocial conduct."

Such a broad definition of antisocial behavior facilitated the enforcement of racialized notions of proper conduct. Although statistics on the racially differentiated impact of the social dangerousness

provision are scant, the results of a study commissioned by the Attorney General of Cuba in 1987 are revealing. Out of a total of 643 cases of "social dangerousness" submitted to the courts in the City of Havana between May and December 1986, 345 were black and 120 were mulatto. Non-whites represented a staggering 78 percent of all the individuals considered to be socially dangerous, a figure more than double their proportion of the total population. Whereas only one in 5,430 whites living in the city was facing charges of social dangerousness, the ratio among blacks (excluding mulattoes) was one in 713. Blacks (again, excluding mulattoes) were declared to be socially dangerous 7.6 times more often than whites, and 3.4 times more often than mulattoes. Social dangerousness was essentially identified with the conduct of blacks, and particularly young blacks. (Eighty-four percent of the socially dangerous individuals were between the ages of 16 and 30.)

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On balance, the information reviewed up to this point paints a picture of the role of race in 1980s Cuban society which is more complex, contradictory, and nuanced than frequently assumed. The structural changes implemented by the government did benefit large sectors of the black population, but such gains were concentrated in areas in which the Revolution had been particularly successful overall and which had received generous government spending. Conversely, the government's failure to meet housing needs facilitated the survival and reproduction of traditional residential patterns which correlated race with poverty and marginalization. This limited the impact of the Revolution's educational program, high rates of graduation notwithstanding. The odds that a black child would grow up in a poor area with sub-standard housing remained significantly greater than for a white child. Likewise, the odds that a black child would be socialized in what Cuban criminologists call "the criminal micro-environment" were also significantly higher. In sum, the achievement of racial equality was largely dependent on government performance overall.

THE "SPECIAL PERIOD"

The ability to perform is precisely what the Cuban government has lacked under the "Special Period." The economic collapse which followed the "rectification period" (1986-1990) and the disappearance of Cuba's commercial and political partners in Eastern Europe, severely limited the state's capacity to distribute goods and services to the population. According to some estimates, between 1989 and 1993 the

gross domestic product declined by as much as 40 percent.

The Cuban government was forced to introduce a number of market-oriented measures, including foreign investment, to foster productivity and stimulate Cuba's stagnant economy. Measures such as the legalization of dollars, self-employment, foreign investment, and private agricultural markets, although economically beneficial, brought a heavy social cost, provoking increasing inequality and resentment in a population used to living in a highly egalitarian setting. As Carlos Lage, Vice President of the Cuban Council of State, remarked, "This will create differences among people, greater than what we have now and greater than we are used to having since the Revolution. . . . The inequality or privilege that can be created are realities we must allow."

Assuming that dollar remittances . . . stay roughly within the same racial group as the sender, about \$680 million of the \$800 million dollars that enter the island every year would end up in white hands.

These economic changes have affected large sectors of the population, regardless of race, education, and other variables. As Cubans on the island themselves recognize, the origins and nature of the crisis are not racially defined. "The issue isn't race," a black scientist asserted in 1993, referring to the crisis. A black female physician agreed: "Here there are not black and white differences. We are all living through the 'Special Period.'" A similar perception was prevalent among respondents to a survey conducted in Havana and Santiago in 1994. Although a higher percentage of blacks (22 percent) than whites (7 percent), considered the crisis to have racially differentiated effects, the dominant view was that it affected blacks and whites equally.

Yet some of the reforms introduced by the government have had racially differentiated effects. The best example is the legalization of the possession of dollars, which has tended to fragment Cuban society along the lines of those who have them and those who do not. For the most part, Cubans receive hard currency from two main sources: family remittances from abroad and links to the Cuban dollar economy, comprising mainly tourism and foreign joint ventures.

Family remittances are probably the most important source of hard currency for ordinary Cubans. Government officials estimate that annual remittances total between US\$600 and \$800 million dollars. Given the racial composition of the Cuban diaspora, it is reasonable to assume that blacks' access to these funds is rather limited. According to the 1990 U.S. census, 83.5 percent of Cuban immigrants living in the United States identify themselves as white. Assuming that dollar remittances are evenly distributed among

white and non-white exiles and that they stay roughly within the same racial group as the sender, about \$680 million of the \$800 million dollars that enter the island every year would end up in white hands. This means that per capita remittances for non-whites would be well below half the amount for whites.

Given their limited access to family remittances, blacks' opportunities to participate in the dollar economy are essentially reduced to the tourist sector—the most dynamic and lucrative in the Cuban economy. As such, competition for these jobs is strong. Tourism is a sector in which blacks should have had privileged access, for in the early 1980s, when tourism was still a relatively low-status sector, they comprised a significant proportion of the labor force employed in hotels, restaurants, and other services. According to the 1981 census, 38 percent of those employed in the service sector were blacks or mulattoes—a percentage slightly above their population share. Yet there is widespread consensus that non-whites are currently under-represented in the tourist sector and face significant obstacles both in finding jobs and in getting promotions. Forty percent of respondents to a survey conducted by the author and Laurence Glasco in Havana and Santiago in 1994 agreed that blacks do not have the same opportunities as whites to obtain employment in this sector. The testimony of the manager of a tourism corporation—a white, 45-year-old female—in a study about prejudice in Santiago de Cuba in 1994, is revealing:

Yes, it is true, there is a lot of racial prejudice in the tourist sector. I have worked there for about a year, and I know that there is a lot of racism. In my corporation, for instance, out of 500 workers there are only five blacks. . . . There is no explicit policy stating that one has to be white to work in tourism, but it is regulated that people must have a pleasant appearance [*aspecto agradable*], and blacks do not have it. . . . In the fanciest store in the city—La Maison—all of the workers are white and out of 14 models only one is mulatto. It is so rare to find black women in tourism that when there is one, people comment that she must be going to bed with an important boss. The few black men who work in tourism always perform manual labor, [working] as truck drivers or lifting merchandise in the warehouses. They never work directly with the tourists, not even in cleaning jobs. All of the personnel is white. I know a black woman who told me of her experience when she tried to find work in tourism. She has a degree in economics, is a specialist in computing, and speaks English, French, and German. She went to the interview very well dressed, even though she herself confessed that everything was borrowed. Well, it was very unpleasant because in the end she was not accepted, but

they did not give her a specific reason. . . . The person who interviewed her did not know how to handle the situation because he could not tell her, “We do not accept you because you’re black.” . . . I think that her knowledge should have counted, after all some white women working in tourism are also ugly, even if they are whites. A few days ago a representative of a tourism corporation said publicly that he does not want blacks in his corporation because “*el negro* (the black) never finishes what he starts.”

One black singer thus remarks, “Tourist firms look like South African companies in the times of Peter Botha. You go there, and they are all white. And I wonder: Where am I, in Holland?”

Although getting a job in such a competitive sector is difficult for everyone, aesthetic and cultural factors are frequently used to justify the exclusion of blacks, on the grounds that they lack the physical and educational attributes needed to interact with tourists. These factors are usually condensed in the concept of *buena presencia* (good appearance), a racialized construct based on the belief that blackness is ugly and that blacks—their formal education notwithstanding—lack proper manners in their social relationships.

A black female librarian from Santiago told me the story of a friend who had been discriminated against while working in a tourist store:

I have a friend who completed a course to work as a cashier in a tourist store, with very high grades. She is the darkest (*la más prieta*) of her group, has a good appearance (*buena presencia*), is a young educated person, and . . . was denied the cashier position. All of the cashiers are blond. After having a job designated for her in Havana, she was transferred three times to different positions, so she is very upset and says that . . . if she denounces what has happened she might get fired.

“I do agree,” a white tourist guide concurred, “that there is an aesthetic criteria in the selection of tourism personnel that favors whites. In my company, out of 60 workers there are three blacks.”

Blacks have to cope not only with the racial prejudices of Cuban managers, but also with those imported by foreign investors and their managerial personnel. They are, however, in a weak position to combat such prejudices, given that these investors are a key element in Cuban development strategy.

It is not only that blacks are facing obstacles in gaining access to these jobs. Given their strong representation in the sector through the 1980s, it must be inferred that some of these workers were displaced from their tourism jobs and placed in less

desirable occupations. There have been persistent rumors that hotel managers are targeting black employees in their “rationalization” programs (a term used to denote the downsizing of the labor force). In early 1994, for instance, the administration of the Habana Libre Hotel was taken over by the Guitart Hotels chain, which fired dozens of workers to improve efficiency. It was rumored that blacks had been singled out in the lay-offs, a fact confirmed by the author in a personal conversation with a source close to the tourist industry.

Government policies to cope with the crisis have provoked social polarization—including a fast growing income gap—but they are racial only in their consequences, not in their design.

Thus, blacks have to cope not only with the racial prejudices of Cuban managers, but also with those imported by foreign investors and their managerial personnel. They are, however, in a weak position to combat such prejudices, given that these investors are a key element in Cuban development strategy. The government is interested in providing investors with the most conducive environment possible, including the strict control of labor and its bargaining capacity. Although access to labor takes place through the mediation of a government agency, investors have, in the words of Guitart Hotels president Climent Guitart, “complete autonomy to select, hire, and, when necessary, fire the hotel’s employees.” In fact, a significant proportion of those who enter these jobs are hired directly by the managers and foreign investors, further limiting the state’s capacity to guarantee a color-blind labor policy.

Two additional factors tend to fuel growing racial inequality under the “Special Period.” Because of blacks’ relative concentration in areas with a dilapidated and overcrowded housing, the opening of *paladares* (family-operated restaurants) is not a viable option for many black families. The other lucrative sector in which blacks are under-represented is the private agricultural sector. Since the early decades of the century, the black peasantry has been displaced from land ownership, so black rates of urbanization have been consistently higher than those of whites. According to a survey conducted by the University of Havana in 1992 in rural communities across the island, whites represented 98 percent of private farmers and 95 percent of members in the agricultural cooperatives.

Most of these racially differentiated effects are clearly unintended and beyond government control. Government policies to cope with the crisis have provoked social polarization—including a fast-growing income gap—but they are racial only in their consequences, not in their design. The dollarization of the economy, for instance, has multiplied income differ-

ences according to race, but the government has no control over the distribution of the dollar remittances that members of the overwhelmingly white Cuban-American community send to their relatives in the island every year.

Factors beyond government control, however, do not explain blacks' under-representation in the tourist sector or in foreign corporations. As mentioned above, by the 1980s blacks had obtained levels of education comparable to those of whites and shared with them the benefits of expanded opportunities in white-collar employment. If anything, blacks' slight over-representation in the service sector should have given them a competitive advantage in the expanding tourist economy.

The fact that these structural advantages did not translate into economic success strongly suggests that a racialized notion of suitability was used to limit blacks' access to the most desirable sector of the Cuban economy. In other words, the under-representation of blacks in tourism cannot be explained as a function of structural conditions. It is, rather, a function of the pervasiveness of a racial ideology that portrays blacks as lazy, dirty, ugly, and prone to criminal activities. An understanding of the situation requires a brief examination of the existence and potential expansion of this ideology under the "Special Period."

FROM PREJUDICE TO DISCRIMINATION

Despite its anti-discriminatory position and egalitarian social policies, the Cuban government failed to create the color-blind society it envisioned in the 1960s. Cuban authorities believed that with the elimination of the "material base" of capitalism and class exploitation, ideologies and mores from the past would automatically disappear. It would take time for racial stereotypes to wither away, but the "new man," formed by the principles of communism, would not know racism. Consequently, the issue of race was silenced in public discourse from the 1960s onward, and precedence was given to the imperative of unity in the face of numerous internal and external threats. Race became taboo in public discourse, its open discussion tantamount to an act of divisionism.

This official silence contributed to the survival, reproduction, and even creation of racist ideologies and stereotypes in a society which was still far from being racially equal, particularly in the Revolution's early years. What disappeared from public discourse found fertile breeding ground in private conversations, where race continued to influence social relations among friends, neighbors, co-workers, and relatives. Supposedly harmless racist jokes in fact reproduced traditional images of blacks as criminal, dirty, lazy, and genetically inferior. Racial ideologies were reproduced within the family and enforced in multi-generational households. (The research of

anthropologist Nadine Fernández about the difficulties faced by interracial couples in Cuba convincingly demonstrates how traditional stereotypes have constrained and influenced the choices of young couples. See, for example, "The Color of Love: Young Interracial Couples in Cuba," *Latin American Perspectives*, Issue 88, Vol. 23, No. 1, Winter 1996, 99-117.)

Seventy-five percent of respondents to the survey conducted by the author in Havana and Santiago in 1994, agreed that prejudice is rampant on the island.

Even so, the extent to which these racial ideologies permeate Cuban society and the intensity of racial prejudice in the popular consciousness is somewhat surprising. Seventy-five percent of respondents to the survey conducted by the author in Havana and Santiago in 1994, agreed that prejudice is rampant on the island. The study conducted in Havana by the Center of Anthropology in 1995 found that 58 percent of whites considered blacks to be less intelligent, 69 percent claimed that blacks did not have the same "values" and "decency," and 68 percent opposed interracial marriages. To put these figures in perspective, in the United States the proportion of whites who declared themselves opposed to interracial marriages was actually lower in the early 1980s (40 percent) than in Cuba, whereas those who believed blacks to be less intelligent amounted to only 23 percent (although this latter figure is severely dated, for the question was dropped from the surveys of the National Opinion Research Center in 1968). Likewise, the proportion of whites who declared no preference concerning the racial composition of their neighborhood is lower in Havana (38 percent) than in the United States (42 percent). These results corroborate what we have known all along: that racial prejudice was never obliterated in Cuban society.

This ideology is frequently presented as a remnant from the past which will disappear in due time. Instead, it has found under the Revolution propitious conditions in which to reproduce and perhaps even expand. The very success of the government in creating equal opportunities in education, employment, and other social areas is now used to demonstrate blacks' inescapable inferiority. A 40-year-old white male physician interviewed in a study in Santiago in 1994 explained:

I have a theory that could be considered fascist, but to me blacks are inferior to whites in regard to their intelligence coefficient. In support of this theory I contend that in Cuba, where for 35 years blacks have had the same opportunities to study, there is no evidence that they can equal whites. How not to think that genetic heredity affects them neurologically and makes them different, that is,

inferior?

Another middle-aged white male professional concurred: "We took the chains off blacks and released them. . . . Now, thirty-five years later, they are worse off, less educated; instead of using the opportunity to improve themselves they continue to be marginals (sic) and criminals."

The state-sponsored media have contributed to the persistence of some of these racist images. Black actors are conspicuously absent from television and are frequently relegated to stereotypical roles. As a black female script writer asserts,

When I worked in television, I told the national director once that the situation of blacks in TV was hopeless, because television does not reflect the reality of blacks. If the programs referred to the past, blacks appeared as maids or *santeros*, (Afro-Cuban priests) but it was not like that. There was a class of black professionals. . . . It's the same today, with the black professionals created by the Revolution. Blacks are always portrayed as marginalized. . . . I would write a script with a black character and they would change it and make it a white.

Movies set in the past, particularly during times of slavery, have treated Afro-Cuban religions and culture as positive examples of popular resistance (e.g., *La última cena*, 1976). However, those dealing with post-revolutionary realities (e.g., *De cierta manera*, 1974, and its characterization of *ñáñigos*) have portrayed the same practices as decadent forms of cultural expression that generate marginalization and prevent integration into the socialist project.

This ideology was not created under the "Special Period," but it has acquired visibility and growing social acceptability in recent years. As an Afro-Cuban woman quoted in the *Miami Herald* asserts, "Something strange is happening during the 'Special Period.' There is a revival of racism."

Despite its failure to eliminate racial prejudice, revolutionary propaganda since the 1960s has asserted the equality of all Cubans. Public discourse has equated racism with past capitalist exploitation and the pro-American, white elite which had been displaced from power. To be racist is to be counter-revolutionary.

The association between the Revolution and racial equality, however, is a double-edged sword. It links the unacceptability of racism to the legitimacy, popularity, and support of the Revolution. But legitimacy, popularity, and support are, together with economic resources, what the government has lost most in the 1990s.

The deepening crisis of legitimacy in the current political system thus creates new spaces for racist ideas and practices to operate and flourish. What used to be social and political anathema restricted to private spaces has become increasingly acceptable and public. A combination of declining fervor for revolu-

tionary ideals and diminishing government control over economic activity has allowed racially discriminatory practices to operate largely unhindered.

Blacks have actively resisted displacement from the most lucrative economic activities through participation in the informal—and frequently illegal—economy, ranging from prostitution to trafficking in the black market, in order to gain access to hard currency.

There is widespread consensus that a large proportion of the *jineteras* (prostitutes) are black or mulatto, a fact confirmed by a source close to a study conducted by the National Committee of the Communist Youth in 1994. Black participation in prostitution is explained on one hand by blacks' limited access to other sources of income. It is also explained, however, by tourists' own racialized notions of sexuality. According to these notions, black sexuality is more appealing precisely because of the racial inferiority of black women and the unrestrained "primitiveness" of their sexual instincts.

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These images, which associate blackness with unrestrained sex, might cause certain women to be viewed as black in a sexual context who would not necessarily be considered black in other social situations. In fact, a 1996 study of the Cuban section of FLACSO claims that the majority of the *jineteras* are *mestizas* (mixed race) who would normally be considered white. These "white" women are seen as *mestizas* because of their involvement in prostitution.

As Nadine Fernández points out in her recent paper, "Back to the Future? Women and Tourism in Cuba," the depiction of certain activities as "sex tourism" is mediated by notions of race. Whereas a relationship between a white woman and a tourist might be viewed simply as "romance," the same relationship might be characterized as "prostitution" if it involved a black woman.

Cuban tourist agencies are profiting from these images of tropical unrestricted sexuality. They frequently advertise the island as a paradise of sexual indulgence and promiscuity. An advertisement for the Sol Palmeras Hotel in Varadero reads, "Cuba: the fire and passion of deepest Caribbean flavor." Julia O'Connell Davidson, a sociologist at the University of Leicester who has conducted field research on the subject of sex tourism in Cuba, argues that for race-conscious white male tourists, the island is paradise "in the sense that rather than being challenged, their racism is both implicitly and explicitly affirmed. They meet large numbers of black women who really *are*

sexually available, and, even more delightful for the white racist, people tell him that these black women are sexually available because they are so *caliente* (lit., hot).” The very existence of these dark prostitutes is then used to confirm the alleged moral deficiencies of black and mulatto women, further racializing the situation.

Other strategies of adaptation and resistance have also become racialized. The migration of large numbers of black Cubans from the eastern provinces to Havana has frequently been interpreted as a black assault on the city. “These *negros orientales* (blacks from Oriente) are taking over,” a white male professional explained, referring to the *palestinos* (lit., Palestinians), as these dark immigrants are called in Havana.

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In fact, internal migration is a function of the uneven development of the dollar economy in different regions of the country. The regional distribution of hard-currency stores can be used as a rough indicator of this phenomenon. Until 1994, hard-currency stores were concentrated in tourist areas, since it was illegal for Cuban nationals to purchase from them. With the legalization of dollars, stores and services that operate in hard currency have been opened in non-tourist areas as well, according to the amount of hard currency circulating in the area. In early 1996, 40 percent of these stores were located in Havana. Conversely, the eastern provinces of Granma, Santiago de Cuba, and Guantanamo had only 10 percent of the total. Not surprisingly, the bulk of immigrants come from these disadvantaged areas. It is estimated that 50,000 people moved to Havana in 1996 alone and that in the first semester of 1997, 92,000 people tried to legalize their status in the city. The government reacted by banning all immigration to Havana in the spring of 1997, imposing fines on both the immigrants and those housing them, and requiring immediate return to one’s place of origin.

The presence of these dark immigrants in Havana was linked to an increase in violence and petty crimes—recognized even by official sources—which has also been explained in racial terms. “Look, we all have problems,” another white male professional states, “but whereas I try to solve them through work or other legitimate ways, what blacks do is resort to robbery.” According to a white female professional, this vision was shared even by government authorities: “A lot of stealing was going on and [the immigrants] were being accused. Fidel offended them by saying something to the effect that ‘Habana Vieja is full of delinquents from Oriente.’”

Racism is thus a self-fulfilling prophecy. Blacks are denied opportunities on the grounds that they are unfit and inferior. Their subsequent strategies for adaptation and survival are perceived not as ways of coping with adversity, but as further proof of their inferiority, laziness, lack of morality, and propensity to commit criminal acts. The entire crisis and its many social ills become, as a result, racialized.

FIDEL’S “SECRET WEAPON”?

The revival of racism and racially discriminatory practices under the “Special Period” has led to growing resentment and resistance in the black population, which finds itself in a hostile environment without the political and organizational resources needed to fight against it. In this context, events such as the Malecón riot in Havana on August 5, 1994, become understandable. These spontaneous outbursts of rage and anger are typical of politically disorganized groups who perceive their situation as hopeless. Symptomatically, participants in this street protest threw rocks at hard-currency stores while calling for “freedom” and political changes.

The surprise of the Cuban government concerning the racial composition of the rioters—according to a leaked official report blacks and mulattoes were in the majority—is a function of its own prejudiced expectations. Many government officials expect young blacks to behave as passive “beneficiaries” of revolutionary gains, not as active protagonists for their own well-being and future.

Perhaps because of these expectations, the reaction of the Cuban government to this process of racial polarization has been slow and inadequate. Given the lack of action, it is questionable whether in official circles there is even an awareness of the problem. The program of the Fifth Congress of the Cuban Communist Party did contain an element of promise: while claiming that the Revolution “eliminated the institutional bases of racism,” it also called for maintaining “the just policy” of increasing black representation in positions of command.

Yet even if fully implemented, the impact of this policy would have been limited, its benefit more symbolic than economic. Positions within the government bureaucracy are generally not as desirable as they were in the past, and they certainly do not provide material benefits comparable to those in the hard-currency sector. However, a visible increase in the number of blacks in the power structure may have sent a message to the private sector that the government would not tolerate racial exclusion and discriminatory practices.

In reality, even a symbolic gain was not realized. The Central Committee (including the Politburo) was whiter following the Fifth Congress, with only 13 percent non-whites, than in 1991 (16 percent non-whites) or 1986 (28 percent non-whites). The propor-

tion of blacks and mulattoes among the candidates for the National Assembly of People's Power in the 1997 elections (21 percent) was higher than in the Central Committee, but still significantly lower than their percentage of the population. Furthermore, this figure does not show a significant improvement over the racial composition of the candidates in the elections of 1993 (19 percent).

While it is frequently argued that blacks support the current regime because they are terrified by the potential return of the white exiles, the limited available evidence does not support this assertion. Even accepting the notion that the Cuban-American community is racist, it does not follow that blacks in the island fully share this perception or, more to the point, that they are politically paralyzed as a result. Opinions about the Cuban-American community are in fact less negative than the government might prefer, a process that the government itself has facilitated by softening its rhetoric about the exiles—presenting them as economic emigrants and welcoming their remittances.

The 1994 CID-Gallup survey found that 75 percent of respondents referred to Cuban-Americans in affectionate terms. Only 27 percent of whites and 33 percent of blacks responding to a survey on racial attitudes conducted in Havana and Santiago the same year agreed with the proposition that the Miami exiles are racist. Thirty-nine percent of black respondents believed that, upon their return, white exiles would bring racism back to the island, but this proposition was supported mainly by blacks 40 years and over (51 percent). Only 18 percent of younger respondents agreed with the statement.

Generational differences [are] far more important than racial ones in determining perceptions about the Revolution, its achievements, its shortcomings, and the impact of the "Special Period."

In fact, one of the conclusions from this survey was that generational differences were far more important than racial ones in determining perceptions about the Revolution, its achievements, its shortcomings, and the impact of the "Special Period." These results coincide with those of the CID-Gallup survey, which found younger Cubans—black and white—to be less satisfied with their personal life on the island. The current crisis has eroded the emblematic achievements of the Cuban Revolution to such a degree that many young blacks no longer perceive the restoration of capitalism as a major reversal. The inability of the Cuban government to maintain its previous levels of social assistance, the deterioration of those that remain, and the introduction of limited market reforms with their legacy of increasing inequality and social polarization, have all undermined the legiti-

macy of the political order, regardless of race.

Despite the greater importance of generational factors, the racialization of the crisis could, however, lead to racially defined forms of organization and resistance, further fueling racial tensions on the island. It is perhaps worth mentioning that although the vast majority of respondents to the 1994 survey on racial attitudes opposed the formation of an all-black organization, a full 16 percent of younger black respondents considered this type of organization to be a necessity.

Racial exclusion almost always breeds racially defined social responses. Unless existing institutions (such as the courts) or organizations (such as the unions and the Party) effectively represent Afro-Cuban concerns, the creation of a racially defined organization might be perceived as the only way to counteract discrimination in the labor market and other areas of social life.

CONCLUSION

Race relations in Cuba have deteriorated significantly under the "Special Period." Not only has racial inequality increased along with other forms of social inequality, but racist ideologies and prejudices seem to be operating with greater freedom than prior to the crisis. Declining government control over the economy and lack of government enforcement of color-blind hiring and promotion practices have opened new spaces—and expanded old ones—for racist ideas to result in discriminatory practices.

It is difficult to argue that Afro-Cubans represent a base of support for the current government. This assertion might be as inaccurate as its opposite—that whites oppose the government en masse. Evidence suggests that it is more accurate to analyze political attitudes along generational rather than racial lines. Older Cubans, regardless of race, appear more concerned that a political change might destroy what remains of the safety net created by the government. This concern appears less relevant to younger Cubans, who are also, as a rule, better educated than previous generations.

The belief that blacks are Fidel Castro's "secret weapon" rests on the assumption that they fear the return of racism in a post-Communist future. In fact, racial discrimination is a reality that blacks already face in Cuba, and an increase in racism brought about by the return of the exiles is not particularly feared. Afro-Cubans, in sum, should not be automatically seen as a base of uncritical support for the government.

From a historical perspective, the racialization of the "Special Period" is not unique. Race has been integral to every major crisis in Cuba's modern history. Race remains central to the definition of Cuban nationhood and identity. As in previous transitions—1890s, 1930s, 1959—the current crisis is fraught with racial tensions, social dislocation, and

competing notions of *la Patria*.

While their specific course of action cannot be known, blacks will certainly not acquiesce to displacement or exclusion. In the introduction to their *Afrocuba* anthology, Pedro Pérez Sarduy and Jean Stubbs write that “no matter what happens . . . black Cubans are a force to be reckoned with.” In 1899, an observer stated in almost identical language: “The existence of blacks must be reckoned with in every phase of the reconstruction of the island.” Times might be different, but some of the issues remain the same.

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