

Cubans look to U.S. example to fix racism? Not so fast

By Tom Whitney

March 25 2016

In his [March 24 report](#) on racial discrimination in Cuba, *New York Times* reporter Damien Cave suggests the visit of an African-descended U.S. president to the island could help end silence on an issue which persists, he claims, despite Cuba's pretensions of equality. Cave was reporting in Cuba when Obama was visiting.

The reporter heard from a black academician in the United States who complained that Cuban leaders meeting with the President and audiences who heard him "were nearly all white," as were Cuban - Americans accompanying Obama to Cuba.

Cave cites the Afro-Cuban economist and author Esteban Morales, a lead authority in Cuba on race relations, who indicated that as of 2007 Cuban political leaders were 70 percent white and that "most scientists, technicians and university professors ... were white." From interviews Cave learned that blacks were underrepresented in Cuba's tourism industry and as owners of new small businesses in Cuba.

Professor Morales, who as a youth fought in Cuba's revolution, has more to say, however. In his "Race in Cuba," (Monthly Review Press, 2013), the author admits that, "it's true that there's racism, racial profiling, and discrimination nowadays, but [it's] a phenomenon that Cuban society, flawed as it is, has made great strides in addressing."

Slavery in Cuba was "a wound impossible to heal in 50 years of revolution." He adds that racism thrived during the terminal years of Spanish colonialism and in 1902 - 1959, the years of the U. S.- dominated republic. The Revolution erred, because "the goal was to fight a status of poverty that was deemed to equal at all social levels;" specific anti-racist policies weren't prioritized.

Fidel Castro in March 1959 proclaimed racism to be a "social scourge that we had to cure." After that, official silence prevailed. Protests against racism were viewed as violating the unity that had become crucial in confronting counterrevolutionary violence, sabotage, and economic blockade. That was another mistake, Morales writes.

He adds that institutional racism and legal tolerance of racism are absent in Cuba. And besides, "We criticize as revolutionaries who take these things almost as self-criticism, aware that ... we blacks would have never come such a long way without a revolution in Cuba." There's no need, he insists, to follow the U.S. line and "use terms such as totalitarian dictatorship, lack

of democracy, or violation of black people's civil rights." In fact, Afro-Cuban people enjoy health care outcomes, educational access, security from police assaults, and access to the polls that in the United States now are faltering.

In 2009, President Raúl Castro put new energy into efforts to undo racial discrimination. Figures [reported in 2014](#) by Rafael Hernández, editor of the Cuban journal "[Temas](#)" ("Themes"), documented progress in the area of political leadership. He provided census data indicating that "Cuba's whole population, as defined by color, consists of 65 percent whites, 10 percent blacks, and 25 percent mulattos."

Against that background, Afro-Cubans make up 35 percent of Communist Party members and 42 percent of Young Communist League members, respectively. Nearly 29 percent of Communist Party leaders in Cuba's provinces are Afro-Cuban. Of 14 members of the Party's Political Bureau, four are black. Over 35 percent of the delegates to Cuba's National Assembly are of African descent. The 31 members of the Council of State include 12 Afro-Cubans.

Obama "urged Cubans to respect the power of protest to bring about equality," according to Cave. The president's "comments, and sincerity, instilled in many Cubans a new hope and offered a knowing vote of confidence."

In the United States, however, such confidence and hope in achieving equality may be in short supply among Black Lives Matter protesters and advocates for reform of the U. S. justice system. The same may be true also for critics pointing to a childhood poverty rate among black children in the United States hovering [around 40 percent](#) and black infant death rates there that are [twice those of](#) white babies.

Reporter Cave mentions that, "Socialized medicine and education also helped create a society more deeply shaped by interracial interactions and marriages than the United States." But on that point socialism is off the hook: Morales attributes Cuba's large population of mixed-race people to easier black-white social relations during Cuba's slavery era and afterwards as compared with those periods in the United States. Interracial parenting was rampant of course during U.S. slavery.

Mr. Cave approvingly records Obama's statement that, "We want our engagement to help lift up Cubans who are of African descent." In his book Esteban Morales describes U.S. concern about racism that under the auspices of Cuban exile scholar Carlos Moore in 2009 morphed into an interventionist anti-Cuban declaration from U.S. intellectuals. Moore has received U.S. government funding. His critique, said Morales, was "about stereotyping and other long neglected issues we have to solve here in Cuba [on our own]."

Morales objects to the tendency of "social struggle against racism in Cuba to quickly become part of the political confrontation between Cuba and the United States. It requires taking a position separating [Cubans] from the fight for socialism, a system that has allowed blacks and mestizos in Cuba to have a position within society unlike any non-white groups in other societies of the Western Hemisphere."

Reporter Cave echoes this tendency in his article. He makes sure to note: "Some Afro-Cubans, like the hip-hop artist known as [Soandry](#), linked the president [Obama] to 'what can be achieved in a capitalist system.'"

Thus the New York Times returns to instinctive behavior. The remarkable phenomena of a U.S. African-descended president and a U.S. presidential visit to Cuba end up as context for casting Cuban socialism in a bad light.