

# Free essay on toward a new racial construct: cuba and cubanidad

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The issue of race has been at the core of Cuba's cultural identity for hundreds of years. Liberation from Spain, an egalitarian quest, and the empowering concept of *cubanidad* brought Cuba into the family of nations, and yet independence came with racial complications with which the country struggled well into the 20th century. "Cuba and Cubanness were represented in vastly different ways in 1899, when the defeated Spain had to relinquish sovereignty. Despite their differences, all these definitions had a common element: the shared belief that 'race' was at the very core of the nation." The persistent problems of race and inclusion were, in many ways, exacerbated by the challenges of nationhood. Property relations and the racial composition of government raised new questions about an old problem, namely, "on how racially inclusive and egalitarian postcolonial Cuba should be." In spite of these "modern" complications, Cuba's Spanish, African and native ethnicities have combined to give the island nation a compelling and dynamic culture, yet one that still struggles with an identity crisis which endows the shared ideal of *cubanidad* with special significance. The over-arching fact of early Cuban history is the Spanish conquest and colonization of the island, which was a key piece in Spain's Caribbean possessions. Racial discrimination and the ongoing marginalization of native Indians and former African slaves (and their descendents) was intrinsic to Spanish colonial rule in Cuba, as it was throughout the empire's American possessions. Throughout the 19th century, slaves and free blacks alike were relegated to menial labor, which served as much to solidify their social disenfranchisement as it did to abet the social and economic status of Cuba's Spanish ascendancy. "

All trades and mechanical artsemployblack and mulatto slaves, and it is not uncommon to see workrooms in which only the master is white and four or five journeymen, slaves of the owner, or rented under the same condition.” Cuba’s sugar economy served as the approximate parallel to America’s cotton crop; both required large numbers of slave labor in order to maximize profitability. And like America, a dominant population made slaves of the black population. “ Since the elimination of the native peoples of Cuba, and the heavy importation of slaves to serve as exploited laborers in the new Cuban sugar economy, Cuba has been a nation with noticeable African physical and cultural features.” Unlike the United States, the black population outnumbered the non-black population in Cuba. Johnetta Cole writes that it was this fact, with the possibility of black domination, that was used as a rationalization for delaying independence. The first war of independence and the formation of a multi-ethnic Liberation Army helped begin the slow move toward integration, though the white slave-owning peninsulares and criollas did not turn away from the island’s tradition of racial segregation.

Spain’s repressive colonial apparatus functioned to keep Cuba’s diverse ethnic groups under its economic control, a kind of de facto, readily available source of cheap labor. As such, Spain was able to exploit natural resources according to a system that it had perfected throughout the Americas. As well, the maintenance of slavery and the ingrained racial divide “ hindered the emergence of a class identity among the urban popular classes.” In response, Cuba’s under-classes came together to form a group with common

interests and problems. Living and working conditions drove laborers from the subject ethnic groups together so that they might take collective action against their Spanish masters. This collective labor movement came to oppose the imposition of free (slave) labor in Cuba's factories and provided the impetus for what would become Cuba's abolitionist movement.

Colonialism had the effect of dividing the races into social rankings. "As a successful strategy, it rationalized and justified the exploitation and dehumanization of the 'other' while reinforcing itself through enslavement and other forms of subjugation by Europeans for economic purposes." The result was a social hierarchy that was delineated by physical attributes, with those physical characteristics of Europeans begin equated with status and intellectual superiority. It was in this way that race in Cuba was used to segregate racial populations, to give one group a built-in advantage while another could be kept down based on skin color.

The colonial system laid a solid foundation for the institutionalization of racism and discrimination in Cuban society, a problem that most agree is a fact of life in Cuba. "A survey conducted in Havana and Santiago in 1994 found that 85 percent of respondents agreed that prejudice is rampant in the island." The phenomenon by which racial prejudice has become intrinsic to Cuban life is similar to the way in which racism attached itself to American culture. Racial stereotypes and negative ideologies have, over generations, become intertwined with the ways in which Cuban families see the world and understand their place in society. For example, interracial couples still encounter significant socio-economic difficulty in Cuba, just as

they do in the United States.

Despite the continued presence of racism in modern-day Cuban society, the Cuban revolution and the rise of Fidel Castro at least began an official dialogue about the problems of discrimination. It was Castro's contention that racism and revolution are two mutually exclusive terms, and that a true revolution could not hope to succeed amid an environment of racial suppression. Upon taking power, Castro called for a public debate on race and discrimination and called the tradition of racial prejudice in Cuba "a national shame." The outcome of all this was an unprecedented national movement against racism in 1959, which included countless conferences and symposia on the problem. It was Castro's opportunity to show the world how his Proclamation Against Racial Discrimination had helped improve race relations and living conditions on the island. There were cross-racial dances and a call for psychological studies of how to end racism once and for all. In a speech, Che Guevara announced that the Communist revolution had at long last put an end to slavery in Cuba.

However, in the post-revolutionary era, Cuba has struggled to put its racist path in the past. Some have promoted cubanidad as an ethos of equality in an effort to build a truly egalitarian society. The writer Jose Marti and other Cuban intellectuals have used this social construct to project a multi-racial vision of Cuba. In Marti's vision, "the societal divisions of race were to be ignored and eliminated as all Cubans united around the same goal, an independent patrimony." Marti's construct broadened the idea of "white" to include guajiros, or peasants, with the white criollos. In this way, Marti was able to "whitewash" the traditional

preconceptions that separated the criollos from the mestizo and mulatto populations. But it was the leveling of all racial divisions that cubanidad aimed at accomplishing what all could agree was a de-racialized society. “The evocation of the mulatto as a marker cubanidad used the idea of mulattoization, through the symbol of the mulatto, to represent a physical, cultural, and ideological ajiaco (Cuban stew) of the Spaniard and African.” It is this racial mélange that modern-day Cubans have sought to promote. Before 1959, Cuba was concerned with establishing itself as a predominantly white nation. Since that time, and with the changes wrought by the revolution and Castro regime, cubanidad has come to mean mulatizaje, with its focus on an African rather than a European racial background. And yet the truth is more complex and multi-ethnic. It is likely that Cuba will never truly come to terms with its past and embrace true equality until it accepts all aspects of its cultural heritage, including European, African and the other groups that have come to live on the island.

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