

Multiracial Societies:

Is There a Single Model?

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LAS RAZAS EN CUBA: UN MODELO ALTERNATIVO

"Hey, guy, come down!"

The fellow at the bottom of the ladder was my childhood friend Orlando Fernandez, who was black. He lived accross the street, in our Eastwood-like neighborhood of Almendares, in Havana, ever since I could remember. More so, I can distinctly recall the day his family moved in. Orlando insisted in climbing to "my" tree, so we had a big fight. His father, a liberal professional and a mason, like my father was, intervned and forced us to make peace. We were good buddies ever since.

In Cuba, the year is divided into two seasons: drought and rain. For us, kids, it had many more: the top season and the kite season, the yoyo, marbles, skating, biking and baseball seasons, and many more...

Orlando and I always enjoyed them together, playing at either one's home or in the street, with the rest of the kids in the block. We competed, we disagreed, we fought and called each other names (even four letter word names!) without giving it a second thought as to whether it was "politically correct" or not. But, all was done in good faith and it helped that Orlando had never had

to ride in the back of a bus, drink from a special water fountain or go to a segregated school.

At the start of the Cuban revolution, Orlando's father, who spoke several languages, got a high position in the Foreign Trade Ministry. Shortly after, he sent Orlando to study in the Soviet Union. He spent several years there, went to College, and was now a big manager in the Ministry of Agriculture, with a government car and all.

"Hey, guy! What are you up to now?" he said again as I came down the ladder with my brush and paint can. "I have been watching you, working around the house for SIX weeks now. And NOBODY in this country gets that much vacation!".

"They let me go..." I said. He looked me all over and scratched his beard. He said: "Do you want to work with me, in Agriculture?" "I am not revolutionary", I answered. "I know that -but that is not what I asked you."

To make a long story short, I started working as statistician for the Ministry of Agriculture a week later, and worked there until I left Cuba in 1980.

The story of our friendship was not very different from that of other kids of working or middle class extraction in Cuba, in the fifties. I won't say that there were no racial differences in Cuba nor that the people were "color blind". But, in the 70 years elapsed since the abolition of slavery, in 1880, Cuba had made large progress toward an integrated society.

Blacks slaves were brought to Cuba since the early 1500's, to work for their masters, just as had previously occurred to the Greeks with the Romans, or to the Jews with the Egyptians. In the early 1800's blacks constituted a third of the population. But of these, almost half were already freed and owned small farms and shops.

Spain used the race issue (and the close example of Haiti's slave revolt) as a political weapon to curbe Cuban's independence movement in the first half of the 19th century. But in 1868, at the start of the War of Independence, Cuban revolutionaries freed their slaves and let them join the army. With this action, Cubans cut the last hold Spain had on them.

Many black men, free and slave, distinguished themselves among the officer corps. General Antonio Maceo was second in the chain of command and Juan G. Gomez, a black lawyer, was the personal delegate of Marti, the independence movement leader. After the war, Gomez, along with many other black Cubans, held high positions in the government, including his lifelong Senate chair. In 1933, the head of the army was already black. In 1940 the president was black. Many of these men were of mixed race, which is often the case in Latin America.

In the professional and economic spheres, 20% of doctors, lawyers and teachers were black, as reported in the 1943 census.

The population was then about 30% non white. The primary and secondary schools and the access to the University was open to all races. However, on the average, blacks were poorer than whites. And since education was better in private schools, blacks as a group were still less educated and occupied a lesser socioeconomic level. In the uppermost social and economic levels, blacks were still discriminated against. Separate social clubs existed for affluent whites, blacks and mulattoes. However, all professional societies, churches and lodges were completely integrated.

How was such racial harmony attained in so short time, in Cuba? It was a long and engaging process for, both, whites and blacks: it takes two to tango. And one of much good will and mutual accomodation. A process that works only if both sides are really willing to breach the gap.

In England, a thousand years ago, Normans conquered the Saxons. I wonder how many Britts, today, care what is their ethnic origin. In Yugoslavia, on the other hand, Serbs and Croats have been constantly fighting with each other, for one thousand years. England is a world economic and political power; Yugoslavia is a mess.

Maybe we could borrow old Ben Franklin's revolutionary slogan, apply it to the multicultural and multiracial context, and say:

either we hang together or we hang separately