

OLD HISTORY IN THE “NEW” CUBA: EXPLORING THE LEGACY OF RACE AND ECONOMIC INEQUALITY ON THE ISLAND TODAY

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the reasons why racism persists in Cuba more than fifty years after the 1959 Revolution in which Fidel Castro promised Afro-Cubans to eradicate racism from the island. More specifically, it investigates Cuba's racist history and concludes that the enduring problem cannot be resolved by economic and social policies alone. While Fidel Castro introduced social and economic reform, his prohibition of discussion on the controversial topic of race relations due to his desire to maintain control prevented a resolution of institutional racism.

After the fall of the USSR, the Cuban government implemented temporary economic liberalization policy reforms that remain today.³ Under Raúl Castro's leadership the economy continues to expand.⁴ However, as the economy broadens by moving towards a free-market model, there is an increase in both economic

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³ Council on Hemispheric Affairs, “Revolutionary Racism in Cuba,” Council on Hemispheric Affairs, June 21, 2011, <http://www.coha.org/revolutionary-racism-in-cuba/>.

⁴ Council on Hemispheric Affairs, “Revolutionary Racism in Cuba.”

and social exclusivity stemming from the racist history of slavery on the island. Thus, Afro-Cubans lack the ability to participate in the free market aspect of the Cuban economy, placing them at an economic disadvantage. While current literature discusses Cuba in terms of either economic or social factors, authors Drake and Davidow take a holistic approach by investigating the relationship between Cuba's enduring history of social and economic inequality that Afro-Cubans encounter today. Finally, the authors introduce proposals promoting greater racial equality for Afro-Cubans.

INTRODUCTION

Why does racism persist in Cuba? The 1959 Revolution promised to eradicate inequality and racism. However, more than fifty years later, prejudice and discrimination remain ingrained in Cuban society. Today, even after Fidel Castro ceded power to his brother Raúl, Afro-Cubans are scrambling to make extra money by selling products on the streets to supplement their shrinking income from government jobs. Ironically, Afro-Cuban direct participation is shunned in the private sector although they make their living selling products on the streets in view of these newly established businesses.

This paper analyses the continuing presence of racial discrimination and subsequent economic inequality in Cuba despite the regime's alleged formal elimination of these inequalities during the 1959 Revolution.⁵ Although the 1959 Revolution alleviated much of the institutionalized racism present in Cuba through "a set of reforms intended to eliminate racial disparity in public spaces, education and employment,"⁶ these reforms had their shortcomings. While these policies addressed Afro-Cuban issues of unequal access, they did not fix the inherent social biases against individuals with darker complexions.⁷ For the first several decades, Castro's newly implemented social and economic reforms such as free health care and education as well as the food rationing system⁸ were a success, they were not sustainable without outside financial support. Eventually, when the outside financial support ended, the underlying issues of racism and

⁵ Alejandro De La Fuente, "Race and Inequality in Cuba, 1899-1981," *Journal of Contemporary History* 30, no.1 (January 1995): 153.

⁶ Council on Hemispheric Affairs, "Revolutionary Racism in Cuba."

⁷ Council on Hemispheric Affairs, "Revolutionary Racism in Cuba."

⁸ Council on Hemispheric Affairs, "Revolutionary Racism in Cuba."

inequality that had been temporarily solved with these policies began to reappear.

Although Castro's social and economic reforms helped bridge the racial gap in access to basic social services, Fidel Castro's policies did not address the underlying racial tensions that are a result of over three hundred years of slavery on the island.⁹ In part Castro likely prohibited discussion of race due to the divisive nature of the topic, which could undermine stability in Cuba. Admittedly, many of these revolutionary reforms enabled Afro-Cubans to have an active role in Cuban society.¹⁰ However, one Cuban scholar we interviewed noted that "the primary mistake in the battle against racial discrimination in Cuba was to assume that a political gesture could sweep away a cultural heritage of hundreds of years."¹¹ The Cuban government succeeded in decreasing the racial gap through the aforementioned social reforms, but the reforms did not change racist attitudes that have been part of the island culture for centuries. These racist attitudes have continued as evidenced by the jobs afforded to the Afro-Cubans.

Although the history of racism in Cuba allowed few positive outcomes for the Afro-Cubans, it provided them an opportunity to address their adversity through their distinct identity. While racism remained, as demonstrated by the two-tiered racial system in Cuba, Afro-Cuban participation in national wars enabled Afro-Cubans to develop a strong common identity, which helped them to mobilize after the abolishment of slavery.¹² While the creation of a distinct Afro-Cuban identity enabled Afro-Cubans to find commonalities with each other, the legacy of racism remained inherent in Cuban society. Therefore, it can be argued that while the revolution created equality in some ways, it also succeeded in cultivating two very distinctive identities and experiences for its citizens. First, there is the Spanish Cuban experience, which is proudly presented to visitors on the island. The other experience is that of the Afro-Cuban, which is largely ignored by the government and carefully hidden from the island's visitors.

The evidence presented in this paper is based on primary and secondary

⁹ Chomsky, Aviva, Barry Carr, and Pamela Maria Smorkaloff, "Sugar, Slavery, and Colonialism," In *The Cuba Reader: History, Culture, Politics*, eds. Aviva Chomsky, Barry Carr, and Pamela Maria Smorkaloff (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 37.

¹⁰ All conversations took place under the agreement that the information would not be attributed and that the person would remain anonymous.

¹¹ Anonymous scholar at the University of Havana

¹² Aline Helg, "Afro-Cuban Protest: The Partido Independiente De Color, 1908-1912," *Cuban Studies* 21, (1991).

documents as well as an academic research trip to Cuba in June 2016 where we met with several experts on politics and race.¹³ The paper unfolds in four sections starting with a historical overview that traces race relations from the colonial period to Raúl Castro's 2008 economic reforms. This leads to an analysis of the most recent economic reform package, the "Lineamientos," and the current status of Afro-Cubans. Since the election of Donald Trump in 2016, the future of U.S.-Cuban relations is uncertain. We briefly discuss how this uncertainty will affect Afro-Cubans' livelihood. Finally, we analyze the factors affecting the Afro-Cuban experience and propose recommendations to alleviate racism against Afro-Cubans.

EXISTING SCHOLARSHIP ON RACE IN CUBA

The literature on the topic of racial and economic inequality in Post-Revolutionary Cuba is relatively limited. Many Cuban researchers have been unable to publish articles on the topic of racism because the government prohibits the discussion of dissenting ideas particularly about race. Therefore, many scholars face challenges in obtaining firsthand accounts from Afro-Cubans.¹⁴ Although the Cuban government has become more lenient in recent years in allowing citizens to have mobile phones and home computers, freedom of expression in Cuba is still very limited. Individuals who openly express and support dissenting ideas "are often subject to smear campaigns and arbitrary arrests, as are artists and academics who demand greater freedoms."¹⁵ Academia is supposed to be a forum through which scholars can express controversial opinions. However, the Cuban government does not permit this practice particularly regarding scholarship on Cuban politics, which is critical of the regime. Of the existing scholarship about the relationship of race and socioeconomic class in Cuba, we noticed three predominant categories. The first group encompasses research that establishes frameworks with which to study racism in Cuba. The next group is comprised of works that address Afro-Cuban identity, and the final group consists of research regarding the economic disparity between Afro-Cubans and Spanish Cubans.

Literature regarding a Cuban framework that theorizes about race

¹³ Anonymous scholar at the University of Havana.

¹⁴ "Cuba Events of 2016," Human Rights Watch, accessed November 6, 2016, <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2017/country-chapters/cuba>.

¹⁵ Ibid.

relations in terms of the revolution is very limited. Cuban Scholar Alejandro de la Fuente is the only author who has published literature about Cuba that mentions a framework for scholarship regarding race relations in the revolutionary period. In his work, de la Fuente argues that the existing literature tends to examine race in light of four potential explanatory frameworks (De La Fuente, 1995): (1) the revolution inherited and then solved the issue of racial discrimination; (2) the revolution inherited a race problem, then perpetuated it (De La Fuente, 1995); (3) the revolution had a positive impact on race relations (De La Fuente, 1995); and (4) despite the revolution's positive impact on race relations and its work to eradicate the most important aspects of inequality, racism and discrimination remain in Cuban society (De La Fuente, 1995). While we do not agree with all of De la Fuente's outlined frameworks, our research and discussion seek to examine race in light of frameworks two and four.

We disagree with both frameworks one and three that De la Fuente proposes because our research suggests that the revolution inherited a race problem and attempted to fix it, but the reforms made were insufficient. Regarding framework three, we argue that the revolution did not have a positive impact on race relations because of the Special Period depression, which ushered in a new set of economic reforms that allowed Spanish Cubans to thrive and caused Afro-Cubans to suffer along the periphery. Finally, frameworks two and four support our research and analysis because they address two different facets of race and revolutionary reforms. We use these frameworks to explain the importance of the relationship between race and economics in Cuba, and how this relationship affects Cuban society in the modern era.

There is comprehensive scholarship about the history of race and Afro-Cuban identity in Cuba dating back to the slave trade (Helg 1997, Benson 2016). Benson (2016) agrees, noting that the colonial legacy of slavery was the reason the Communist Revolution's attempt to establish racial equality was largely unsuccessful. One Cuban expert, speaking to us anonymously, proposed that race in Cuba has strong historical foundations and noted that the Afro-Cuban narrative is absent from recorded Cuban history and current popular culture.¹⁶ While this scholarship supports our argument in terms of historical background, this literature lacks analysis regarding the implications of this racial history on the economic and social atmosphere in Cuba today. Our research seeks to fill these gaps.

¹⁶ Anonymous scholar at the University of Havana.

Furthermore, there is also a group of researchers focused on the economic disparity between Spanish and Afro-Cubans (LeoGrande and Thomas 2002, Blue 2007). While Blue (2007) focuses on the Special Period (1989-2000), LeoGrande and Thomas (2002) study Cuban trade with the USSR. Blue (2007) argues that the Special Period economic reforms counteracted the regime's attempted eradication of racial discrimination through social reforms at the start of the revolution. LeoGrande and Thomas (2002) assert that the sugar trade partnership with the USSR was established as a way for Cuba to escape its dependency on the United States (LeoGrande and Thomas, 2002). However, this system led to a dependency on the USSR instead (LeoGrande and Thomas, 2002). Altogether, this body of research suggests that the Special Period created an economic crisis which, as Blue (2007) explains, reinstated socioeconomic classes and a racial hierarchy. The regime's social reforms equated racial equality with economic equality and did not acknowledge the social factors that contributed to racism in Cuba. Given this information, Blue (2007) seeks to understand the correlation between the decline in the government's influence on the daily lives of Cubans and rise of racial inequality in Cuba post-Special Period (2007). While Blue's (2007) study is very similar to our research, there are distinctive differences. Blue (2007) argues that Special Period economic reforms are the sole cause of the racial hierarchy present in Cuba today. Although the Special Period economic reforms are a major contributing factor to the racial hierarchy present in modern Cuba, it would be remiss to suggest that these economic reforms were the sole reason for racism on the island today. Our research suggests that the Special Period economic reforms are one of several economic and social factors that have put Afro-Cubans at an economic and social disadvantage in Cuban society.

In essence, these scholars have shown that racism in Cuba is rooted in the social makeup of the island as a result of the colonial legacy of slavery. Moreover, the research reveals that Afro-Cubans suffered economic disadvantages under the Castro regime, particularly during the Special Period. However, research that takes a more holistic approach as to how these two aspects are interrelated is needed to address the Afro-Cuban experience. This paper will make suggestions to alleviate Cuba's status quo by discussing relevant factors not discussed together in prior research such as: Cuba's history, its economic and social policies, and the U.S. influence. The first proposal is that the Cuban government should work toward implementing equal opportunity employment laws. Second, the

open discussion of racism and the history of Afro-Cubans must be encouraged to mitigate the inherent effects of racism in Cuban society. Third, because Cuba is moving toward a mixed socialist and free-market economic model, the government needs to regulate the private sector in order to create greater equality among races in the emerging private sector.

HISTORICAL OVERVIEW: EXPLORING THE FOUNDATIONS OF RACE IN CUBA

Race in Cuba today is the product of a long history of racial inequality, going back to the slave trade that began in the early 1500s. This section looks to explore the foundational history of race in Cuba, starting from the pre-revolutionary period and moving to Fidel Castro's ascension to power. This background is essential in developing a nuanced understanding of race in Cuba so as to comprehend the perpetuation of social and economic injustices despite promises of equality.

Pre-Revolutionary Cuba

Cuba's slave trade and subsequent race relations are inherently connected to both Spanish and American colonial presence on the island. Spain's colonization process, which began in 1492, quickly led to the complete annihilation of the indigenous people, both by violence and disease.¹⁷ By the early 1500s, wealthy Cubans began importing West African slaves to work on the sugar plantations in order to make up for the loss of the indigenous workforce. The wealth accumulated by the sugar plantations reinforced the dominance of slaves as the workforce in Cuba. By 1847, there were 437,000 slaves in Cuba.¹⁸ While the Castro regime emphasizes sugar as the dominant feature of Cuban economy and society during the time of Spanish rule, we argue that slavery was the foundation of economic wealth and societal success in Cuba, which today is a forbidden narrative within Cuba itself.

After the U.S. took control of Cuba from the Spanish following the Spanish-American War in 1898, the colonial legacy of racial inequality continued. In fact, the United States military discriminated against black Cubans by rarely

¹⁷ De La Riva, Juan Perez, "A World Destroyed," in *The Cuba Reader: History, Culture, Politics*, eds. Aviva Chomsky, Barry Carr, and Pamela Maria Smorkaloff (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 20.

¹⁸ Chomsky, Aviva, Barry Carr, and Pamela Maria Smorkaloff, "Sugar, Slavery, and Colonialism," 37

appointing them as officers. Aline Helg's account of the Afro-Cuban struggles reminds us that "the U.S. military government demobilized the Liberation Army and discriminated against blacks and mulattoes when appointing officers for the newly created rural guard and artillery corps."¹⁹ Although slavery was outlawed in 1886 in Cuba, it left an enduring legacy on the island- a rigid social hierarchy that remained a crucial component of Cuban society until the 1959 Revolution. Social classes were based on race and economic status, with wealthy landowners of Spanish descent at the top of the social hierarchy and African slaves at the bottom. With the goal of gaining rights equal to those of Spanish Cubans, Afro-Cubans fought in the Independence War against colonial Spain, but "they discovered that the stereotypes of inferiority attached to them by the Spaniards had not been erased by their role in the war."²⁰ The narrative of white Cuban supremacy was already ingrained in the island's society, politics, and economics.

The legacy of racism continued during Fulgencio Batista's U.S.-backed dictatorship (1940-58) despite his being the first non-white president of the Cuban Republic. His election was a significant moment in Cuban history that is sometimes overlooked due to the corruption and violence he brought to Cuba. His time as president ushered in an enormous amount of American tourism. As a result, gambling and prostitution ran rampant, and Americans owned many hotels and restaurants. White Americans and wealthy Cubans thus monopolized the economic sector and further cemented the racism already existent in Cuba.

Racism, discrimination, and social exclusion were widespread prior to the revolution and affected not only Afro-Cubans but also people of mixed race and the poor.²¹ In pre-revolutionary Cuba poverty and race were not mutually exclusive groups because there was considerable overlap. The majority of Afro-Cubans and mulattos in Cuba lived in extreme poverty in pre-revolutionary Cuba due to a lack of education and an inability to obtain jobs. According to Alejandro De la Fuente, "it is not unreasonable to assume that their educational situation deteriorated during the late pre-revolutionary period."²² The poor,

¹⁹ Helg, "Afro-Cuban Protest," 103.

²⁰ Helg, "Afro-Cuban Protest," 102.

²¹ Esteban Morales Dominguez, *Race in Cuba: Essays on the Revolution and Racial Inequality* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2013), 114-5.

²² Alejandro De La Fuente, "Race and Inequality in Cuba, 1899-1981," *Journal of Contemporary History* 30, no.1 (January 1995): 153.

especially impoverished Afro-Cubans and mulattos, were disgruntled by their lack of adequate education and other social services, and consequently their lack of social mobility in pre-revolutionary Cuba. As a result, many Afro-Cubans and mulattos began to support Fidel Castro's July 26 Movement, hoping for a change.

Fidel Castro's Rise to Power

Fidel Castro capitalized off of Afro-Cubans' anger about economic and racial inequality. In the beginning of his campaign, "Castro gained the support of many Cuban citizens with promises to restore political and civil liberties."²³ These initial campaign promises were relatively moderate and appealed to many Cubans. However, "later, Castro began to take a more radical tone, nationalizing American businesses on the island, and further angering the U.S. with an increasingly anti-American rhetoric, and aligning with the Soviet Union in a 1960 trade deal."²⁴ These initial campaign promises were relatively moderate and appealed to many Cubans. However, "later, Castro began to take a more radical tone, nationalizing American businesses on the island, and further angering the U.S. with an increasingly anti-American rhetoric, and aligning with the Soviet Union in a 1960 trade deal."²⁵ While Batista and the U.S. reinforced these economic and racial divisions as a way to control Cuba economically and politically, Fidel Castro upset the balance of control by encouraging Afro-Cubans to support his July 26 Movement. Throughout the movement, Fidel Castro and his guerrillas continuously demanded the return of the 1940 constitution because it created a level of social equality that was impossible under Batista.²⁶ The 1940 Constitution created social equality by providing free education and health care to all Cubans regardless of race or socioeconomic class.

It is possible that Fidel Castro actually believed that creating equality through social programs eliminated racial inequality. Indeed, Castro's policies granted Afro-Cubans many rights that they did not previously have. As a result of socialist reforms Afro-Cubans were no longer at the bottom of a rigid social

²³ Bryan Logan, "How Fidel Castro Rose to Power and Ruled Cuba for 5 Decades," *Business Insider*, January 13, 2015, <http://www.businessinsider.com/fidel-castros-life-and-rise-to-power-2015-1>.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Devyn Spence Benson, *Antiracism in Cuba: The Unfinished Revolution* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2016), 31.

hierarchy because the regime had instituted reforms giving equality to all. However, these reforms did not address the problem of Afro-Cuban criminality. Afro-Cuban criminality remained prevalent on the island despite reforms. According to Blue, “Racial stereotypes of black criminality abound in Cuba and the vast majority of Cuban prisoners are black, despite the equalization of class differentiation normally associated with crime.”²⁷ While Afro-Cubans gained rights through Castro’s policies, racism continued to exist notably in the disproportionate number of criminals.

Another reason Fidel Castro hesitated to address race explicitly because he needed the support of Afro-Cuban leaders as well as widespread support from all Cubans for his new government.²⁸ Support from Afro-Cuban leaders came because the majority of Afro-Cubans did not have access to education or health care under Batista and stood to benefit from Castro’s social reforms. According to a 1962 survey, “80 percent of black Cubans were wholly in favor of the revolution, compared to 67 percent of white Cubans.”²⁹ In addition, Afro-Cuban support for Castro and a communist regime is also reflected through much of the poetry and art produced by Afro-Cubans at this time.

One poem found in Nancy Morejón’s “Black Woman”³⁰ demonstrates the emotional and physical response of black women to Castro’s revolutionary guarantees, thus showing that Castro’s goal of unified support from Afro-Cubans was not unfounded. Morejón’s work illustrates the

“Black Woman”
 Now I exist: only today do we own, do we create
 Nothing is foreign to us.
 The land is ours.
 Ours the sea and the sky
 The magic and the vision.
 Compañeros, here I see you dance
 Around the tree we are planting for communism.
 Its prodigal wood resounds.

²⁷ Sarah A Blue, “The Erosion of Racial Equality in the Context of Cuba’s Dual Economy,” *Latin American Politics and Society* 49, no. 3 (2007): 41, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/30130810>.

²⁸ Benson, *Antiracism in Cuba*, 31.

²⁹ Julia Cooke, “Amid Sweeping Changes in US Relations, Cuba’s Race Problem Persists,” *Al Jazeera*, August 13, 2015, <http://america.aljazeera.com/articles/2015/8/13/amid-sweeping-changes-in-us-relations-cubas-race-problem-persists.html>.

³⁰ Pablo Milanés, “The Original Sin,” in *The Cuba Reader: History, Culture, Politics*, eds. Aviva Chomsky, Barry Carr, and Pamela Maria Smorkaloff (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 416.

power of Castro's communist revolution and the beautiful promise of a country whose people are united under a common desire for equality. Fidel Castro's promise to combat such structural issues – the first leader in Cuba to do so – as well as his successes against the seemingly all-powerful United States gave many Afro-Cubans hope. And yet, “from its start, the revolutionary movement was dominated by middle-class white men.”³¹ Castro's own revolutionary government was not inclusive of black women like Morejón.

In 1959, Fidel Castro developed a campaign to eliminate racial discrimination in the new republic.³² Through this campaign, he inadvertently created one of the greatest legacies of the regime.³³ In time, with help of the newly established social programs and the campaign to end racism, Afro-Cubans reached a level of economic prosperity that would not have been possible outside of the Castro regime. Castro implemented these programs not necessarily because he wanted to improve the economic standing of Afro-Cubans, but because social equality and racial unity were crucial in order to create a universal Cuban identity grounded in the revolutionary values of equality for all that would ensure loyalty to the Castro regime.³⁴

For years, Afro-Cubans enjoyed racial equality under the Castro regime as a result of the reforms that Fidel Castro had implemented after the revolution. In particular, “the government relied on socialist mechanisms of social justice to solve its ‘race problem’.”³⁵ The social reforms created equal pay, education, and job access, which created complete economic equality in Cuba with the help of considerable economic support from the USSR. However, it is important to note that the government's legislative attempt at eradicating racism failed because they did not induce changes in social norms, allowing subconscious racism to persist

From 1959-1989, everything was owned by the state, and subsidized heavily by the Soviet Union. In 1964, Cuba and the USSR signed a five-year trade agreement, which stated that the Soviet Union would increase sugar imports at a higher price than the world market.³⁶ Cuba was insulated from fluctuations

³¹ Cooke, “Amid Sweeping Changes in US Relations, Cuba's Race Problem Persists.”

³² Benson, *Antiracism in Cuba*, 30.

³³ *Ibid.*, 31.

³⁴ Council on Hemispheric Affairs, “Revolutionary Racism in Cuba.”

³⁵ Blue, “The Erosion of Racial Equality in the Context of Cuba's Dual Economy,” 40.

³⁶ William M LeoGrande and Julie M Thomas, “Cuba's Quest For Economic Independence,” *Cambridge University Press* 34 (2002): 327.

in international sugar prices, and the USSR continued to finance the Cuban trade deficit.³⁷ Cuba maintained relative economic equality among its citizens regardless of race during this period. With the economic support that Cuba received from the USSR, the socialist revolution in Cuba flourished. Many of the social reforms that Fidel Castro implemented such as socialized healthcare and education established positive results for all races. According to Blue, “by 1981, equal levels of whites, blacks, and mulattos were graduating from high school and university. Life expectancy and the infant mortality rate had improved for the entire population, with only a slight white and non-white gap.”³⁸ While the increase in education for all races as well as the improvement in infant mortality rate indicates that racial inequality had dissipated since the start of the Revolution, the success of the social programs accounts for only the economic aspect of racial inequality.

Fidel Castro implemented the economic and social reforms believing that they would eradicate inequality on the island, whether racial or economic. The implementation of socialized education allowed all races equal access to jobs and equal economic compensation. However, De La Fuente proposes in his framework two that the revolution inherited and perpetuated a race problem.³⁹ Additionally, in framework four, he suggests that the revolution had a positive impact on race relations, but racism and discrimination remain in society.⁴⁰ Thus De La Fuente suggests that these policies did not address the issues of institutional racism that remain present in Cuba but only addressed economic and social reforms. According to the Council on Hemispheric Affairs, “The Castro government achieved more for blacks in fifty years than previous administrations had in the last 400 years; his policies only addressed issues of unequal access without changing structural biases underlying society.”⁴¹ In addition to ignoring the racial biases ingrained in Cuban society, the regime also censored the discussion of race relations in the public sphere. Its problematic rationale was that if discussions of race were illegal, then it also did not exist. This error perpetuated a legacy of systemic racial inequality with no repercussions.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Blue, “The Erosion of Racial Equality in the Context of Cuba’s Dual Economy,” 40.

³⁹ De la Fuente, “Race and Inequality in Cuba”, 132-3.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Council on Hemispheric Affairs, “Revolutionary Racism in Cuba.”

The lack of open discussion about race relations made it impossible to adjust and improve policies that were intended to help Afro-Cubans, countering the initial benefits of the social reforms.⁴²

In reality, it is more likely that Fidel Castro prohibited discussion of race in Cuba because it was a divisive issue that threatened his ability to maintain control. Open discussions about race concerned the new regime because debates about race had the possibility to threaten national unity in the face of the U.S., which was encouraging the destabilization of the communist regime.⁴³ The U.S. aspired to dismantle the regime not only because Castro had expelled all U.S. businesses from Cuba and nationalized the land, but also because of Cuba's proximity to the U.S. and their relationship with the USSR. Whether Fidel Castro knew his decision to accept monetary support from the USSR would dictate decades of U.S.-Cuban relations is hard to say. However, it is clear that Castro elected to partner with the USSR in an effort to break away from U.S. influence because "Castro's courtship of the Soviet Union began shortly after the revolution with a visit to Havana by Soviet Vice Premier Anastas Mikoyan. As he took on the United States he knew he needed Soviet protection in order to survive."⁴⁴ At first, Castro likely assumed that a partnership with the USSR would protect Cuba from the U.S. and also ensure monetary support for social and economic programs. However, this alliance dictated the entire course of Cuba's economic and political future, an outcome that Fidel Castro could have anticipated.

Once the partnership between Cuba and the USSR developed, the U.S. would implement any means necessary to retaliate against the regime. Castro knew this and although the regime was somewhat protected because of his relationship with the USSR, he could not risk a nation divided by talks of race or socioeconomic status otherwise he could lose power. The United States used Castro's concern about division as well as Cuba's relationship about the USSR to sanction Cuba. Accordingly, "Washington asserted that Cuba's alliance with the Soviet Union and its behavior internationally constituted a national security threat to the United States. The embargo was therefore necessary to contain a nearby enemy."⁴⁵ Then,

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ E.M. Dominguez, *Race in Cuba*, 117.

⁴⁴ "Castro and the Cold War," PBS, accessed November 6, 2017, <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/comandante-cold-war/>.

⁴⁵ Arturo Lopez-Levy, "Chaos and Instability: Human Rights and U.S. Policy Goals in Cuba," *NACLA Report on the Americas* 44, (2011): 16.

President Eisenhower withdrew the U.S. embassy from Havana in 1961, and in April the CIA's force of trained Cuban exiles landed in the Bay of Pigs.⁴⁶ From the 1960s until Obama's second term as President, the U.S. continued with the embargo against Cuba even though decades had passed since the fall of the USSR.⁴⁷

It can be inferred that the status of U.S.-Cuban relations today is heavily influenced by Cold War Politics, and because Cuba has very little to offer the U.S. the government can continue to implement the Cold War Era political policies against the island nation. Following the Cold War era, the U.S.' main argument against Cuba is that "the regime violates its citizens' human rights and ought to be overthrown for their benefit."⁴⁸ The U.S. does not explicitly discuss race as one of Cuba's human rights violations, and it is possible that the U.S. is not concerned about the plight of Afro-Cubans. However, the fact that the U.S. continues these strong Cold War foreign policy measures against Cuba indicates that the human rights argument against Cuba is another attempt to incite opposition against the regime particularly in present Cuba in which more people have access to internet and outside news. It is clear that the U.S. government is using Cuban human rights abuses as a justification for continuing the embargo because, "U.S. policy toward no other country, from China to Russia to Saudi Arabia, has been so exclusively predicated on human rights as Cuba policy has—at least at face value."⁴⁹ The U.S. justifies the embargo because of Cuban human rights abuses while failing to address similar violations in countries that the U.S. closely depends on for natural resources. The U.S. policy exists to divide the country against the regime rather than truly caring about the difficulties facing Afro-Cubans.

While the economic stability in Cuba prior to the collapse of the USSR allowed Spanish Cubans and the regime to forget about the issue of racism in Cuba, racism continued to exist. The overall quality of life in Cuba was improving for all Cubans thanks to socialized health care, food rations, and free education but below the surface, racism perpetuated. While the Afro-Cuban experience

⁴⁶ Hugh Thomas, "The U.S. And Castro, 1959–1962," *American Heritage*, October/November, 1978.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Lopez-Levy, "Chaos and Instability," 16.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

at this time was not free from racism as the regime claimed, it was concealed by revolutionary reforms that eliminated many of the economic inequalities between races. For Afro-Cubans the benefits of the communist regime outweighed the problems of racism that were largely hidden because of social benefits. Although there is very little quantitative data about the correlation between the wage gap and race during the Special Period, information from a 1981 census shows that Afro-Cubans were overrepresented in the poorest urban neighborhoods with overcrowded and dilapidated houses.⁵⁰ In the beginning of the revolution the state owned every industry and wages were essentially equal, so the housing disparity among races was not of concern to the government because everything else was equal. With the fall of the USSR and the onset of the Special Period, the days in which race and economic status were not an issue in Cuba disappeared. Fidel Castro's social programs allegedly eliminated race and class in Cuba for good, but were only temporarily successful during the Revolutionary Period because of financial support from the USSR.

Cuba's "Special Period" of Economic Depression

So as to overcome the economic depression after the fall of the USSR, which Fidel Castro aptly named the Special Period, the regime had to institute economic reforms in order to survive. These reforms included allocating more funds to the tourism sector, establishing a dual monetary system, legalizing remittances, and increasing foreign direct investment. The government transitioned the economic system from a state socialist model to a mixed model with a combination of state sectors and a small private sector.⁵¹ The mixed economic model allowed the economy to rebuild after the fall of the Soviet Union, but these reforms required the regime to prioritize economic survival at the cost of forgoing a totally communist economic system.

How did these reforms affect the Afro-Cuban population in Cuba? One problematic outcome was that the regime began to move from its traditional state-run economic system to a mixed socialist and free-market model. The evident drawbacks to this mixed economy include the increased wage gap, the reappearance

⁵⁰ Alejandro De La Fuente, "Race and Income Inequality in Contemporary Cuba," *NACLA Report on the Americas* 44, (2011): 32, doi:<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10714839.2011.11725549>.

⁵¹ Jorge I Domínguez, Omar Everleny Pérez Villanueva, Mayra Espina Prieto, and Lorena Barbería, eds., *Cuban Economic and Social Development*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012), 262.

of racial and economic hierarchies between Spanish Cubans and Afro-Cubans, and finally the resurgence of institutionalized racism. Due to the wage gap, racial and economic hierarchies resurfaced, and the colonial legacy of institutionalized racism reappeared. According to Leogrande and Thomas, "Food shortages appeared, along with neurological diseases related to poor nutrition. The resulting political discontent produced serious anti-government disturbances and growing pressures for emigration."⁵² Emigration to the United States required a level of privilege that few Afro-Cubans had access to, so the majority of Afro-Cubans remained in Cuba and continued to work for the government while the remaining Spanish Cubans transitioned to jobs in the private sector.

The wage gap was further exacerbated when the regime lowered state salaries, which primarily impacted Afro-Cubans, the majority of whom worked in the state sector. Inflation became a way to transfer financial resources from state employees to the state budget, which made it possible for the state to avoid unemployment and maintain the existing levels of spending on health and education services.⁵³ However, with the legalization of small businesses, wealthy Spanish Cubans began to open small businesses such as *Paladares* and *Casas Particulares*, which are in home restaurants and in home accommodations for tourists respectively. Afro-Cubans could not open these types of small businesses because their homes were typically in bad condition and in undesirable areas for tourists.

A survey by geographer Sarah Blue provides a more accurate portrayal of the overall wage-gap between Afro-Cubans and "white" Spanish Cubans because it reflects the effects of Special Period economic reforms on race. According to the survey, "70% of whites work in the low-paying state sector, compared with 81% of mulattos and 84% of blacks."⁵⁴ Conversely, the proportion of whites among the self-employed is three times larger than among mulattos and blacks."⁵⁵ Blue's survey, which was taken at the end of the Special Period, indicates that Afro-Cubans and mulattos together held the majority of jobs in the state sector and very few were self-employed, so together Afro-Cubans and mulattos occupied the majority of the lowest paying jobs on the island. The survey shows the existence of a wage gap between Afro-Cubans and Spanish Cubans due to an unequal distribution of races in the public and private sectors. It can be inferred that these inequalities

⁵² LeoGrande and Thomas, "Cuba's Quest For Economic Independence," 343.

⁵³ J.I. Domínguez et al., eds., *Cuban Economic and Social Development*, 41.

⁵⁴ Blue, "The Erosion of Racial Equality in the Context of Cuba's Dual Economy," 46.

⁵⁵ De La Fuente, "Race and Income Inequality in Contemporary Cuba," 32.

between Spanish Cubans and Afro-Cubans emerged during the Special Period for the following reasons; the legalization of small businesses, increased foreign direct investment especially in the tourism sector, increased remittances, the poor quality and location of Afro-Cuban housing, and finally the creation of the dual-currency economy. These temporary reforms had long-lasting effects on race relations in Cuba.

The mixed economy that Cuba used during the Special Period had clear benefits for the regime, which prospered with minimal assistance from other countries. All of these effects enabled the pre-revolutionary racial and social hierarchies between Spanish Cubans and Afro-Cubans to flourish once again because many Spanish Cubans were able to advance financially in ways that Afro-Cubans could not. While economic liberalization occurred in Cuba out of necessity, many of the outcomes of economic liberalization were unintentional.

The regime continued to enact reforms that generated higher revenues and stressed the importance of “self-sufficiency to reduce the need for imports, and called for increasing foreign investment and exploiting the potential of the tourism sector.”⁵⁶ The state increased funding to the more lucrative tourism sector, which advertised Cuba’s beautiful beaches, kind people, and inexpensive bars to attract foreigners to the island with money to spend. In addition to increasing funding to the tourism sector, Fidel Castro also legalized the use of the U.S. dollar in Cuba, which created a dual monetary system.

The Cuban government legalized the use of the U.S. dollar in the form of the Convertible Cuban Peso in addition to the Cuban Peso as a short-term solution to a lack of hard currency on the island. The use of the U.S. dollar in Cuba is an interesting phenomenon because of the U.S. and Cuba’s complicated history of foreign relations. Because the Cuban Peso was not strong enough to use to purchase necessary goods on the global market without financial support from the Soviet Union, Cuba needed the Convertible Peso in order to purchase necessities, such as crude oil, grain, and fruit.⁵⁷ Furthermore, “given that many Cubans already received US dollars from family members abroad, the government simply legalized a currency that had been circulating within the

⁵⁶ LeoGrande and Thomas, “Cuba’s Quest For Economic Independence,” 343.

⁵⁷ Jeffrey L Roberg and Alyson Kutruff, “Ideological Success or Ideological Failure,” *Human Rights Quarterly* 29, no. 3 (2007): 790.

economy illegally.”⁵⁸ Similar to the regime’s emphasis on tourism, which was not intended to become an important source of long-term income for the country, the dual monetary system outlived the Special Period, and continues to operate as a way to regulate the economy.

Despite the Cuban government’s hope that the two currencies would be a short term economic solution, the use of dual currency continues into the present. Although, the government operates off of two currencies, the Cuban Peso (CUP) and the Convertible Cuban Peso (CUC), neither of these currencies is exchangeable in foreign markets.⁵⁹ “The CUC is pegged to the dollar and worth 25 times as much as the CUP.”⁶⁰ The reason that the CUC’s value is pegged to the U.S. dollar dates back to Special Period politics. After collapse of the USSR, the trade agreements that kept the Cuban economy going disappeared. In an effort to stimulate the economy, Fidel Castro legalized the possession of U.S. dollars, which many wealthier Cubans received from relatives in the United States.⁶¹ At this time, “Dollar stores [are] mushroomed to capture the money flowing in from newly welcomed tourists and Cubans living abroad. Meanwhile, all Cuban state workers were still paid a pittance (less than \$20-worth a month) in the old Cuban peso.”⁶² The legalization of the U.S. dollar and the creation of the CUC helped the Cuban economy get back on track. At first, the United States had little to say about the legalization of U.S. dollars in Cuba, but under the George W. Bush Administration new policies governing Cuba’s use of the dollar forced Cuba to make policy changes governing the use of U.S. currency.

In the U.S.’s on-going ideological battle with the Cuban regime, the Bush Administration enacted policies restricting dollar remittances to Cuban families by Cuban American relatives, and the government also attempted to prevent international banks from providing Cuba with U.S. dollars, which Cuba needed because the Cuban peso cannot be used for international trade.⁶³ As a result of Bush’s policies, Fidel Castro barred U.S. currency notes from being used as payment

⁵⁸ Roberg and Kutruff. “Ideological Success or Ideological Failure.”

⁵⁹ Economist, “Cuba’s Currency Double Trouble,” *The Economist*, October 2013, <https://www.economist.com/blogs/americasview/2013/10/cubas-currency>.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Giles Tremlett, “Cuba ends affair with American dollar,” *The Guardian*, October 27, 2004, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2004/oct/27/cuba.gilestremlett>.

on the island.⁶⁴ In order to continue using the dollar, which remains essential to the Cuban economy, Fidel Castro introduced his own policies sanctioning U.S. currency on the island. These days, anyone on the island with U.S. dollars has to exchange them to the CUC, which can then be used to purchase goods and services. Anyone who exchanges dollars to CUCs receives 13% less because the government issues a 10% penalty to exchange U.S. dollars along with a 3% transaction charge.⁶⁵ Despite the taxes, Cubans who work in the tourism sector or who receive remittances from family abroad continue to use dollars to purchase items that they need and cannot get through the government's rationing system.

Since the beginning of the communist revolution, many Cubans received illegal remittances from family abroad. In many Cuban households remittances were akin to a second income, which families used to purchase necessities on the black market that were not available through government rations. During Special Period reforms, the government permitted Cubans to receive remittances as another way to infuse more money into the Cuban economy. "The inflow of remittances and private transfers from abroad influenced the liberalization process."⁶⁶ According to studies discussed in Dominguez et al, "The effect of remittances allows households to double their consumption."⁶⁷ Many of the Afro-Cubans that we spoke to while in Cuba explained that their families are more limited economically because they do not receive remittance due to a lack of family abroad. According to Arsenault, "the people benefiting from remittances are white; the landlords are white. As capitalism creeps into Cuba more than 60 years after a revolution that promised social equality, local residents and analysts are concerned about the gap between the haves and have nots and the ethnic undertones of growing inequality on the island."⁶⁸ The majority of remittances are sent to Spanish Cubans whose families had wealth prior to the revolution and some family members were able to leave Cuba and send money back. As a

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Catherine Hamm, "Heading to Cuba? Some tips on exchanging Euros vs. U.S. dollars," *LA Times*, June 22, 2015, <http://www.latimes.com/travel/deals/la-tr-spot-20150621-story.html>.

⁶⁶ Rob Vos, Enrique Ganuza, Samuel Morley, and Sherman Robinson, *Who Gains from Free Trade: Export-Led Growth, Inequality, and Poverty in Latin America*, (New York: Routledge, 2006), 233.

⁶⁷ J.I. Dominguez et al., eds., *Cuban Economic and Social Development*, 272.

⁶⁸ Chris Arsenault, "In Cuba, Racial Inequality Deepens with Tourism Boom," *Reuters*, 2016, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-cuba-inequality-idUSKCN0VB1LT>.

result of the legalization of remittances, many Spanish Cuban families survived the Special Period without economic hardship unlike Afro-Cuban families who were not likely receiving money from abroad. Therefore, this policy contributed to the racial hierarchy reappearing as Afro-Cubans quickly slid back into poverty.

In addition to remittances, the dual currency and in home businesses, the government implemented foreign direct investment as a final mechanism to promote economic growth during the Special Period. In 1992, the regime enacted a constitutional amendment that permitted a maximum of forty-nine percent private foreign ownership in joint-enterprises.⁶⁹ The government continued to have considerable control over foreign corporations, but with the amendment the regime was able to attract new investments primarily in the tourism sector.⁷⁰ Foreign direct investment enhanced Cuba's tourism infrastructure and upgraded many hotels in order to better appeal to tourists from Europe and the United States which in turn created jobs in the private sector of the tourism industry that paid in U.S. dollars rather than Cuban pesos.

Employers in the private tourism sector favor light skinned Cubans over Afro-Cubans due to the perception that light skinned Cubans embodied the authentic cultural experience that tourists were expecting. As a result, many of the outcomes of economic liberalization had negative impacts on the Afro-Cuban community.⁷¹ De La Fuente's (2001) research found the prevailing opinion within Cuban society to be that "Afro-Cubans are unattractive, dirty, prone to criminal activities, inefficient or lack proper manners and education."⁷² De La Fuente's research demonstrates the obvious existence of racism in Cuban society, despite what the government insists. While the intent of the nationalistic, communist agenda behind ending racism seems positive on the surface-level, especially in comparison to other Western countries, the daily experiences of Afro-Cubans portray a failed revolutionary goal.

This history demonstrates the social and economic disadvantages Afro-Cubans have encountered. The roots of the contemporary Afro-Cuban experience lie in historical racism. The Cuban Revolution purportedly outlawed racism but when Fidel Castro stepped down and handed power over to his brother Raúl,

⁶⁹ LeoGrande and Thomas, "Cuba's Quest For Economic Independence," 344.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Anonymous Scholar at the University of Havana

⁷² Alejandro De La Fuente, "The Resurgence of Racism in Cuba," *NACLA Report on the Americas* 34 (2001): 32, doi:<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10714839.2001.11722587>.

Afro-Cubans continued to live in a state of inequality. The legalization of the U.S. dollar in addition to the establishment of a small private sector re-created economic class divisions in Cuban society. Life in the “New Cuba” after the Special Period was very difficult for those who lacked access to U.S. dollars, and Afro-Cubans most often did not. This hardship combined with ingrained racism sparked a cultural movement to preserve Afro-Cuban heritage. The next section introduces the economic reforms under Raúl Castro and explains how they have continued to affect the Afro-Cuban population adversely.

CONTEMPORARY EXPERIENCES AND RAÚL’S ECONOMIC REFORMS LABELLED “LINEAMIENTOS”

The resurgence of Special Period racial divisions have continued to worsen under Raúl Castro’s authority because of a series of economic reforms (lineamientos) particularly those governing privatization that he implemented to expand the economy. Given the history of racial inequalities, the new set of reforms (lineamientos) under Raúl Castro led to six specific outcomes that merit analysis—four negative outcomes and two positive outcomes. The two positive outcomes that improved life for Afro-Cubans as a result of these lineamientos are social and educational tools, which are used to combat the persistence of racism on the island. Social tools include discussing existing racism in Cuba, and educational tools include integrating Afro-Cuban history into the primary-university curriculum throughout Cuba. Despite the positive outcomes, as Alejandro De La Fuente’s second and fourth frameworks suggest, Afro-Cubans daily lives continue to be impacted by four major negative outcomes. These outcomes include: increased stereotyping of Afro-Cubans, a wage-gap, exclusion from the small business sector, and lastly the gradual loss of the revolutionary spirit.

Although the reforms established during the Special Period as well as those following the Special Period created disadvantages for Afro-Cubans both racially and economically, the liberalization of the economy has allowed many Cubans to realize that racism is still present in Cuba. De La Fuente explains, “One of the unintended and perhaps one of the few welcome effects of the so-called Special Period is that it forced this conversation on the Cuban people. But it did so by giving race a social visibility, currency and importance that it had not

enjoyed for decades.”⁷³ Raúl Castro is not only allowing race to be discussed more openly, but education about Afro-Cuban history is also changing. According to Erik Gleibermann, “In Havana, community artists and members of the National Ministry of Education are collectively exploring how to integrate Afro-Cuban history and related gender concerns into the primary-through-university school system.”⁷⁴ The new education initiative indicates that the regime recognizes that racism remains prevalent within governmental institutions and society, and the effects of racism can only be mitigated through open discussion and education in schools.

Under Raúl’s leadership, the income disparity is more evident as the distinction between the private and public sectors continues.⁷⁵ In the private sector, employees are paid in U.S. Dollars, whereas, in the public sector employees are paid in Cuban pesos.⁷⁶ How does this create an income disparity? Cuban Pesos (CUPs) are used to pay public sector employees, whereas the private sector, which is typically comprised of tourism jobs, pays in U.S. Dollars. Private sector employees then take these dollars and exchange them into CUCs. Even though many Cubans are still paid in CUPs, “nearly all consumer goods are priced in CUCs.”⁷⁷ The dual-currency system, albeit necessary during the Special Period Depression, highlights and exacerbates divisions between individuals who work in the private sector with access to hard currency, and those who work for the government and have to depend on their wages and food rations to survive.⁷⁸

The lack of extra money after food rations makes it hard for government employees to budget for entertainment, home upkeep, and clothing for their families. Until the Special Period, the food ration program was able to distribute a sufficient amount of food to each citizen regardless of income. However, at the onset of the Special Period, “Cubans have to complete their diet with products sold in the hard currency stores and the farmers’ markets, where one pound (450 grams) of pork can cost 40 pesos (1.60 dollars) – the same price fetched by a

⁷³ Alejandro De La Fuente, “The New Afro-Cuban Cultural Movement and the Debate on Race in Contemporary Cuba,” 712.

⁷⁴ Erik Gleibermann, “Where Hip Hop Fits in Cuba’s Anti-Racist Curriculum,” *The Atlantic*, 2016.

⁷⁵ Roberg and Kutruff, “Ideological Success or Ideological Failure,” 790.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Economist, “Cuba’s Currency Double Trouble.”

⁷⁸ Ibid.

pound of onions at certain times of the year.”⁷⁹ The cost of purchasing additional food to supplement monthly food rations would use up the majority of the rest of a governmental salary, which essentially forces government employees to get another job to help their families reach a higher standard of living or alternatively suffer in poverty. Due to a reduction in state payrolls that began as part of economic reforms during the Special Period and continue to the present, individuals who work for the state struggle to meet the basic needs of their family especially because food absorbs between 59 and 75 percent of the family budget in Cuba.⁸⁰

While Spanish Cubans have more employment options, most Afro-Cubans are constrained to government jobs because of race. Jobs are less competitive in the state sector because they pay less than jobs in the private sector. According to De la Fuente, “racial inequality is significantly larger in the non-state sector than in the less competitive state sector.”⁸¹ In addition, “The private sector is largely family-centered (Paladares and Casas Particulares), and Afro-Cubans have limited access to it. Racial discrimination, in turn, has prevented them from getting equal access to high-paying jobs in tourism and in joint ventures.”⁸² Afro-Cubans’ ability to create home-businesses such as Paladares or Casas Particulares are finite because the majority of Afro-Cubans live in the most crowded neighborhoods in Havana and other major cities whereas the majority of Spanish Cubans live in less congested areas.⁸³ The quality of housing for Afro-Cubans should have been addressed during the initial revolutionary reforms, but it was of less concern to Fidel Castro because of other social reforms that allowed for complete economic equality among races. Currently, housing continues to be an additional obstacle for Afro-Cubans and mulattos in starting a small business along with a lack of financial assets.

We believe that the Cuban economy is making this shift for several reasons. First, the previous communist system that Cuba was operating under provided equal social programs and welfare to all citizens. However, without

⁷⁹ Patricia Grogg, “Cuba’s Reforms Fail to Reduce Growing Inequality,” Inter Press Service, 2014.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ De La Fuente, “Race and Income Inequality in Contemporary Cuba,” 32-3.

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Ibid.

a lot of economic support from the USSR or some other major world power, the communist economy could not be sustained, which forced Fidel Castro to make some difficult decisions and institute some “temporary” free-market reforms. Second, these reforms were never outlawed because the Castro’s realized they could not go back to the old system without backlash from the Cuban people, and they wanted to maintain governmental stability and power so they chose to leave these reforms at the cost of social inequality. Finally, with the normalization of trade relations, many American tourists to travel to Cuba, and also “helped stimulate more interest from other international visitors.”⁸⁴ According to Cuban officials, the economy is expected to grow 2% this year assuming that oil prices increase and tourism continues to expand.⁸⁵ Even though many tourists have started visiting Cuba, the country has a long way to go in terms of hotel infrastructure—something that can only be improved through foreign direct investment in the hotel industry.⁸⁶ Therefore, Raul Castro may have suspected that reinstating the communist economy could jeopardize the economic growth potential that would come from a more favorable relationship with the U.S.

With the historic normalization of trade relations between the U.S. and Cuba in 2014, the Cuban economy was expected to continue thriving because of increased economic support from the United States. However, while the Obama administration’s more liberal economic policies toward Cuba allowed for economic growth, they also exacerbated the already existing socioeconomic class divisions.⁸⁷ As part of the historic thaw with Cuba, Americans were permitted to send up to \$8,000 a year in remittances in comparison to the previous \$2000.⁸⁸ Each year Cuba receives between \$1 billion and \$3 billion in remittances from the United States, which are the primary source of funding for many of the small businesses in Cuba.⁸⁹ The Cuban government is now more capitalist than socialist, which is causing the socioeconomic hierarchy that was present before the revolution to

⁸⁴ Mimi Whitefield and Nora Gamez Torres, “The Next Year Will Determine Raul Castro’s Economic Legacy,” *Miami Herald*, 2017, <http://www.miamiherald.com/news/nation-world/world/americas/cuba/article139967768.html>.

⁸⁵ Whitefield and Gamez Torres, “The Next Year Will Determine Raul Castro’s Economic Legacy.”

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Randal C Archibold, “Inequality Becomes More Visible in Cuba as the Economy Shifts,” *The New York Times*, 2015, <http://nyti.ms/17RP4w1>.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

resurface.

In the beginning of his presidency, Trump spoke of his goals to overturn Obama's policies towards Cuba, particularly with regard to tourism and business investments. As time has passed, it has become evident that Trump's policies towards Cuba tend to be more reactive than prescribed. Trump initially announced several changes to Obama's Cuba policy, which will restrict commerce with the government and limit U.S. travel.⁹⁰ However, despite this announcement no concrete details regarding this policy change have been enacted, and "White House officials said that actual changes remain months away."⁹¹ Furthermore, many policymakers, both Democratic and Republican, are critical of Trump's proposed changes. "Rep. Eric A. 'Rick' Crawford (R-Ark.), whose state seeks increased access to the island's \$2 billion agricultural imports market, called Trump's approach 'failed, outdated, and isolationist.'"⁹² It is hard to know whether these proposed changes will take effect. Since the beginning of his Presidency, Donald Trump, has been relatively inconsistent with proposed policy changes.

However, if these changes are enacted, there will be numerous repercussions. First, Trump's reversals in Obama's policies could "limit the possibility for positive change on the island and risk ceding growth opportunities to other countries that may not share America's interest in a free and democratic Cuba that respects human rights."⁹³ Second, Trump's policies have significant economic implications for Cubans. As word spread that President Trump had "canceled" some of Obama's policies that allowed more Americans to come to Havana, Cuban residents, shop owners, and employees in Old Havana feared that the newly expanded tourism economy would suffer if Trump's travel restrictions were enacted.⁹⁴ Furthermore, Obama's landmark opening of Cuba was incredibly well received throughout Latin America because many countries in Latin America vehemently opposed U.S. isolation of Cuba.⁹⁵ Trump's reversal

⁹⁰ John Wagner and Katherine DeYoung, "Trump Announces Revisions to Parts of Obama's Cuba Policy," *The Washington Post*, June 16, 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/trump-announces-revisions-to-parts-of-obamas-cuba-policy/2017/06/16/dee8671c-52ab-11e7-91eb-9611861a988f_story.html?utm_term=.825e3c9235e3.

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

policies, if enacted, have the possibility to threaten the U.S. relationship with Cuba as well as other Latin American countries.

Finally, Trump's policies will disproportionately disadvantage Afro-Cubans. Despite the overall preference of white "Spanish Cubans" for the tourism industry, according to Alejandro de la Fuente, "the participation of black Cubans in tourist-related, dollar-earning services probably has increased since March 2016, when President Obama relaxed the regulations concerning American visitors to Cuba."⁹⁶ Obama's regulations dictated that individuals could travel to Cuba alone for "people to people" educational tours, but American tourists were not permitted to partake in tour packages at state-owned, all-inclusive hotels, which are popular with European and Canadian tourists.⁹⁷ Frequently, "American visitors stay in rental rooms around the city, including less affluent areas, where Afro-Cubans are better represented. Their visits have had a democratizing effect on the service sector, creating opportunities for individuals, families, and neighborhoods that were previously excluded from the tourist economy."⁹⁸ Trump's proposed policies, in conjunction with Raul Castro's preference for an economy with less state-run entities and more small businesses, provide a bleak outlook for Afro-Cubans, many of whom were starting to benefit from the legalization of privatized businesses on the island.

It became evident after implementing these economic reforms that the post-Soviet Cuban economy could not thrive and also continue to provide social services to its people without keeping in effect these Special Period economic reforms. Today, social services remain free to everyone regardless of race or socioeconomic class, but the establishment of the dual currency system, albeit necessary, has allowed prior socio-economic classes to re-emerge and has introduced economic competition reminiscent of a free-market economy. In some ways, the economic goals of the Cuban Revolution have failed. While social services and education remain free, everyone had previously received the same salary despite their job, and the regime encouraged Cubans to find jobs that aligned with their interests. However, now, due to liberalization, Cubans are now motivated to find jobs that pay well. "In the pursuit of foreign currency, professors left university jobs to

⁹⁶ Alejandro de la Fuente, "Under Trump's Revised Policy, Black Cubans Will Get Left Behind, Again," *Miami Herald*, June 29, 2017, <http://www.miamiherald.com/opinion/op-ed/article158976199.html>.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

work as hotel waiters, and doctors took to driving taxis. Some black Cubans say they have trouble getting comparatively lucrative jobs in hotels because of discrimination.”⁹⁹ As the private sector in Cuba continues to grow, the economic success of Spanish Cubans in comparison to Afro-Cubans continues to widen. Raúl Castro’s economic reforms made it easier for Cubans to establish private businesses, simultaneously increasing the importance of remittances, which were critical to finance the start of a small business.¹⁰⁰

Although the current regime has implemented open dialogues about race in Cuba and a new education campaign, additional improvements are needed to alleviate racism. In order for Afro-Cubans and mulattos to ultimately experience financial success on par with Spanish Cubans, the regime must implement equal employment laws governing the private sector. Ecuador, a country similarly diverse, recently passed a reform to their 1938 labor code which “includes provisions to protect vulnerable and historically discriminated groups, such as pregnant woman, Afro-Ecuadoreans and LGBT workers”, alongside recognizing the labor of homemakers.¹⁰¹ The International Labor Organization recognized Ecuador for this landmark reform towards equal employment¹⁰², a law that, if Cuba enacted, could make a significant and positive impact on workplace inequality in Cuba. Unfortunately it is unlikely that the regime will implement such laws for several reasons. First, the implementation of laws governing the private sector would indicate to the world that Cuba has officially transitioned from a socialist state-run economy to a hybrid model, which holds greater resemblance to a free-market capitalist economy. Second, the socialist Cuban government would not want to acknowledge the permanence of the private sector of the Cuban economy because that would be proof that the economic aspect of socialism had failed.

As Raúl Castro continues to institute reforms further liberalizing the economy, Afro-Cubans and mulattos worry about how the spirit of the revolution will be maintained, particularly as the reforms affect the increasing

⁹⁹ Arsenault, “In Cuba, Racial Inequality Deepens with Tourism Boom.”

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ “Domestic Work Recognized in ‘Historic’ Ecuador Labor Law Reform,” Telesurtv, accessed November 6, 2017, <https://www.telesurtv.net/english/news/Domestic-Work-Recognized-in-Historic-Ecuador-Labor-Law-Reform-20150415-0002.html>.

¹⁰² Ibid.

racial divide. According to Maria Luz Fernandez, a primary school administrator, “we need to keep the ideas of the revolution: free education, healthcare, taking care of the elderly and racial equality.”¹⁰³ One of the problems today, according to Luz Fernandez, is that “young people want big houses and cars, but the revolution can’t afford to provide that for everyone.”¹⁰⁴ The interview with Luz Fernandez highlights a concern that Cubans have as the economy continues to liberalize under the leadership of Raúl Castro. Luz Fernandez alludes to the idea that many Cubans have lost sight of the goals of the revolution because they are trading government jobs for those in the private sector that pay in U.S. dollars, which begs the question, are revolutionary values disappearing within the socialist economy? In many ways, the ideals and values of the revolution are slowly fading away from Cuban society because in the “New Cuba” under Raúl, citizens are concerned with finding employment that will enable them to purchase material goods and other luxury items that were not attainable prior to economic liberalization. As a result the government is less concerned about the support of Afro-Cubans now that the economy is growing more rapidly.

The revolution sought to create a classless society in which everyone’s basic needs were met without ensuring that each person could afford all that they want. The popular support for equality that the revolution has used to retain popularity for the past few decades is losing popular support, particularly from poorer Cubans who are struggling to afford basic necessities.¹⁰⁵ In addition, the achievement of racial equality in Cuba was largely dependent upon government performance.¹⁰⁶ This new reality in Cuba has increased economic and racial inequality because of Raúl Castro’s continued support for economic liberalization as well as his more pragmatic views about the future of the Communist Revolution.¹⁰⁷ Although Raul and Fidel both participated in the Revolution from the beginning, Raul is not as bound to the revolutionary ideology as his older brother.¹⁰⁸ Furthermore, Raul Castro has made an effort to shrink the size of government employment

¹⁰³ Arsenault, “In Cuba, Racial Inequality Deepens with Tourism Boom.”

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ Roberg and Kutruff, “Ideological Success or Ideological Failure,” 792.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ Jim Michaels, “Cuban President Raúl Castro: A Pragmatist Who Made Reforms,” *USA Today*, November 27, 2016, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/world/2016/11/27/cuban-president-raul-castro-pragmatist-who-made-reforms/94517778/>.

¹⁰⁸ Michaels, “Cuban President Raúl Castro: A Pragmatist Who Made Reforms.”

and has encouraged entrepreneurship and small business growth.¹⁰⁹ While the greatest support for the Cuban revolution came from the impoverished and socially marginalized, of which Afro-Cubans were generally both, the current suffering of the lower socioeconomic classes, most of whom are Afro-Cuban or of mixed ancestry, indicates that on many levels the spirit and ideals of the Cuban Revolution are no longer relevant in the new economically liberal Cuba.¹¹⁰

The economic area that is growing most significantly is the tourism industry where, “there seems to prevail an understanding that the satisfaction of the tastes of tourists involve certain ‘aesthetic’ requirements within which the nonwhite skin color takes on a negative connotation.”¹¹¹ Cuban tour companies aspire to hire certain types of people to be the face of authentic Cuban culture that predominantly white tourists hope to experience. The tourism industry in Cuba, a growing and extremely crucial economic part of the country, disproportionately hires white Cubans over black Cubans.¹¹² Furthermore, coded language is used to explain the lack of accurate representation and diversity in the tourist industry in response to criticism. While it is not illegal for Afro-Cubans to work in tourism, it is “regulated that people must have a pleasant aspect, and blacks do not have it.”¹¹³ De La Fuente describes this “pleasant aspect” as “a radicalized construct that claims that blacks cannot be hired for jobs due to aesthetic considerations and to the alleged preferences of the tourists.”¹¹⁴ This is explicit racism and uses the euphemism of “pleasant aspect” as a thinly veiled attempt to keep a particular group of people out of the workforce.

Tourism in general is a privilege that requires money and time and is therefore limited to certain socioeconomic classes and races. While there are few statistics about race and tourism, “according to the Mandela Research Firm, 17% of African-Americans take one or more international trips a year.”¹¹⁵ In addition, “according to analysts at MMGY Global, a marketing firm, black travel has rebounded since 2008, which is notable considering that the great recession

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰ Arsenault, “In Cuba, Racial Inequality Deepens with Tourism Boom.”

¹¹¹ Anonymous scholar from the University of Havana

¹¹² De La Fuente, “The Resurgence of Racism in Cuba,” 32-3.

¹¹³ Ibid.

¹¹⁴ De La Fuente, “The Resurgence of Racism in Cuba,” 32.

¹¹⁵ Farai, Chideya, “Traveling While Black,” *New York Times*, January 3, 2014, <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/01/05/travel/traveling-while-black.html>.

doubled the gap between black and white wealth.”¹¹⁶ While companies often market getaways to other minorities, marketing to black tourists is not typical.¹¹⁷ While the tourism industry in Cuba is inherently racist because they offer jobs primarily to Spanish Cubans, it occurs because the Cuban tourism industry targets perceived perceptions of their greatest percentage of clientele-individuals who are upwardly mobile and frequently white. Often, wealthy white tourists feel most comfortable with white tour guides who talk about the white experience and do not mention minority experiences. Tour companies should make more of an effort to market tourism opportunities specifically to black minorities and also to speak about minority experiences.

In addition, there is also a lack of political representation of Afro-Cubans. “Still, despite major economic and social gains, black Cubans...remained underrepresented in the political leadership.”¹¹⁸ While many Afro-Cubans are aware that “social mobilization and conscious policymaking” are the most effective ways to resist policies that hinder Afro-Cuban progress, “Cuba is not a friendly place for autonomous, non-state-controlled social mobilization.”¹¹⁹ However, in Cuba there is a developing “Afrodescendant Movement” that began after the fall of the USSR and the start of the Special Period, and has continued to operate in Cuba today.¹²⁰ The movement emerged as a clear response to the increase of racism and discrimination. Originating in the early 1990s, the movement began as a response to the disintegration of race relations with artists and intellectuals who “began denouncing the persistence of racist practices and stereotypes in Cuban Society.”¹²¹ The birth of the Afro-Cuban cultural movement in a time of economic downturn and heightened racial tensions is remarkably significant. It shows the grit of the Afro-Cuban community in the face of years of discrimination as well as the power of art and education in creating a path of resistance.

Since then, the movement has expanded, and “it now includes community activists working in some of the poorest neighborhoods in the country; organizations that specialize in legal services; gender-based forms of activism; bloggers and

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

¹¹⁸ Cooke, “Amid Sweeping Changes in US Relations, Cuba’s Race Problem Persists.”

¹¹⁹ De la Fuente, “Under Trump’s Revised Policy, Black Cubans Will Get Left Behind, Again.”

¹²⁰ Ibid.

¹²¹ De La Fuente, “The New Afro-Cuban Cultural Movement and the Debate on Race in Contemporary Cuba.”

websites on Afro-Cuban themes; and organizations that frame their demands in the language of citizenship and human rights”.¹²² While this movement is crucial for Afro-Cubans in order to institute change and create more widespread awareness about their concerns, free speech is risky in Cuba. Although the regime sometimes permits protesters to speak out about their concerns, there is no guarantee the government will listen and help bring about change. This movement is a good starting point for Afro-Cubans to mobilize together, but ultimately in order to bring about widespread change political power is needed.

While there are many differences between Apartheid Era South Africa, some similarities exist. The democratic election of Nelson Mandela in South Africa provides another example of a country in which a deeply discriminated against class experienced a rise via political elections. With the multi-racial elections in 1994 came the end of Apartheid, an era of government-enforced racial discrimination against black South Africans.¹²³ While a comparison of racial discrimination in Cuba to that of South Africa is certainly flawed, as they greatly differ in scope, the positive effect of diversifying political representation remains true.

In Cuba criminals are disproportionately black. Evidence of racial profiling occurs with the practice of stop and frisk for unequal policing of minorities. Use of the coded language of the “pleasant aspect,” requires an aesthetic characteristic that can only be fulfilled by being white.¹²⁴ Alongside the use of “pleasant aspect”, stop and frisk in Cuba also uses “ciudadanos con características”, which “is used by the police force to refer to citizens who aren’t white.”¹²⁵ Although there is an interest to quell political dissent, race cannot be removed from a discussion of this policing strategy. Such blatant racism is done under the guise of equal policing, which is not felt by the Afro-Cuban population. The unequal policing of black bodies, with its historical roots in slavery, colonialism, and United States intervention, illustrates how the political system has failed to eradicate racism and create the equality that communism

¹²² De la Fuente, “Under Trump’s Revised Policy, Black Cubans Will Get Left Behind, Again.”

¹²³ Alastair Jamieson, “7 Ways Nelson Mandela Changed South Africa,” NBC News, accessed November 6, 2017, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/other/7-ways-nelson-mandela-changed-south-africa-f2D11702722>.

¹²⁴ Cooke, “Amid Sweeping Changes in US Relations, Cuba’s Race Problem Persists.”

¹²⁵ Ibid.

promised. As De La Fuente powerfully states in “The Resurgence of Racism in Cuba,” “the ultimate irony is that the same government that did the most to eliminate racism also did the most to silence debates about its persistence.”¹²⁶

CONCLUSION

Race in Cuba is a multi-faceted issue with a complicated past. Racial inequality in Cuba is rooted in slavery, and has remained a societal problem, despite Fidel Castro’s revolutionary reforms that purportedly created a society without race and social class. The racism and socio-economic hierarchy that is visible in Cuba today can be traced back to the arrival of the Spaniards on the island. The rigid social and racial hierarchy remained a critical aspect of Cuban society until the Cuban Revolution in 1959 when Fidel Castro instituted social and agrarian reforms creating economic equality and outlawed the discussion of race. Fidel Castro’s death symbolized the end of an era for Cuba. Fidel represented Cold War Communism, and, with his passing, Cuba has the potential to move forward in many different directions.

This paper contributes to the literature on Cuba by analyzing the intersections between historical context, social justice, and economic equality, providing a more in-depth understanding of the often-untold Afro-Cuban experience. In the context of Alejandro de la Fuente’s scholarship on academic perspectives on existence of racism in Cuba, we agree with frameworks two and four. Framework two, which states, “The revolution inherited a race problem, then perpetuated it.”¹²⁷ Framework four, which asserts that “Despite the revolution’s positive impact on race relations and its work to eradicate the most important aspects of inequality, racism and discrimination remain in Cuban society.”¹²⁸ These two frameworks served as a basis for research, and helped the authors to understand that there are both social and economic factors that contribute to the persisting racial hierarchy today. These social and economic factors emerged as a result of the colonial history in Cuba, and have been inherently intertwined since then.

This paper demonstrates that the legacy of racial inequalities persists today. The most recent set of reforms has reinforced and even exacerbated this legacy, leading to the following four negative outcomes: increased stereotyping of Afro-

¹²⁶ De La Fuente, “The Resurgence of Racism in Cuba,” 32.

¹²⁷ De La Fuente, “Race and Inequality in Cuba,” 1.

¹²⁸ Ibid.

Cubans, a wage-gap, exclusion from the small business sector, and lastly the gradual loss of the revolutionary spirit. The only positive outcomes of Raúl Castro's reforms in Cuba included educational and social tools for Afro-Cubans. These tools were established as a result of open dialogues about racism and the inclusion of Afro-Cuban history in the school curriculum. In order for the status of Afro-Cubans to continue improving in Cuban society, it is important for the regime to establish open dialogues about race and promote greater cultural understanding. Many Spanish Cubans are not aware of the uniqueness of Afro-Cuban cultural heritage with roots in slave history. We believe more positive outcomes could occur, not only through open discussion, but also through greater appreciation and understanding of Afro-Cuban culture. The younger generations are gaining a better understanding of the history of Afro-Cubans through school, but the only way to reach greater racial equality in Cuba is for a change to occur throughout society.

The historical narrative behind the political discourse surrounding racism in Cuba provides fascinating insight into the lasting effects of imperialism. Fidel Castro capitalized on garnering support from a disadvantaged population and rose to power with the goal of creating a lasting communist state that focused on social and economic equality. While Fidel Castro and his revolutionary government did truly hope to fully instill communism in Cuba, the equality that is supposed to be at the core of such ideology was never fulfilled. Despite an enormous structural overhaul of the socio-political system and governmental policies declaring racism over, inequality persists in today's Cuba. Cuba offers a powerful case, of a country riddled with the historical remnants of oppressive systems and a revolution whose faulted aims were to rid these systems from the political narrative.

As the economy continues to liberalize and the U.S. continues to normalize relations with Cuba, the colonial legacies of rigid socio-economic classes and racial divisions rooted in slavery have become more pronounced. As a result, many Afro-Cubans and mulattos are dissatisfied with the government and are beginning to doubt the effectiveness of the regime.

The increased discontentment in the group of people that was supposed to benefit the most from the communist revolution indicates that changes in the political structure could possibly occur in the future. Raul Castro values his position and political power, and is clearly willing to appease citizens to keep his power.

Clearly, Castro has already started making changes such as the school curriculum in the hope of maintaining Afro-Cuban support. Whether Castro believes the few changes he made already are enough, or whether he will continue to take Afro-Cuban concerns seriously is unknown.

Although Raul Castro has been the President of Cuba since 2006, his brother Fidel's death in November 2016 left him with the ultimate power and decision-making authority. Around the same time, the U.S. experienced a change in leadership from President Obama to President Trump. While power transitions are good for proposing and enacting change, there is an element of uncertainty for the future of Cuba particularly the future of race relations on the island. Many of the changes needed to improve race relations in Cuba must come from the people. Although the regime can facilitate changes in attitude about race, the people are ultimately responsible for changing society. Race relations will also be affected by U.S.-Cuba Relations, which are uncertain at the moment due to U.S. President Donald Trump's preference for reactive policy making. In addition, the type of relationship fostered between Raul Castro and President Trump has the potential to dictate U.S.-Cuba Relations for the coming years. It is impossible to know how the relationship between the two presidents will unfold or what repercussions for Afro-Cubans will occur.

We believe that in order to ensure the future of the regime, Raul Castro must reconsider Fidel Castro's declaration that racism has been eradicated from Cuba. To a certain extent, the government is already implementing more constructive social changes that are addressing the roots of racism in society. These changes include a more comprehensive and inclusive school history curriculum featuring the history of Afro-Cubans. In addition, Raul Castro is more willing to allow for open public expression of political concerns.¹²⁹ Regardless of whether he listens to these concerns and makes changes, the ability to express these concerns more openly is a step forward. Future political decisions will dictate Afro-Cubans course of action with options that could include inciting a regime change to more subtle protests.

As we look toward the future of tourism on the island, we find ourselves asking another question: Could there be a movement to make tourists more aware of the choices they make, as the tourist industry in Cuba is currently feeding into the white cultural expectations of tourists? According to our anonymous scholar

¹²⁹ Anonymous source from the University of Havana

at the University of Havana, Afro-Cubans are aware of the white expectations of tourists. As Alejandro de la Fuente mentioned, due to the increase in U.S. tourists on the island Afro-Cubans have been able to break into the tourism industry more than before.¹³⁰ However, this is not necessarily due to U.S. interest in Afro-Cuban culture, but instead, out of necessity because the U.S. does not permit Americans on “people to people” visits to Cuba to stay at state-owned hotels. Generally, tourism is limited to wealthier white people from the west because of political power because tourism requires money. As a result, tourism companies cater to the wealthier clientele. In Cuba, the government could take steps to improve racism in the tourism industry by instituting a racial quota system for hiring in both public and private tour companies. However, there is little incentive for the regime to take action on this matter without pressure.

Because Cuba has strong trade relationships with Russia and China, two countries known for human rights abuses, the pressure is unlikely to come from an outside source. Therefore, the “Afrodescendant Movement” must work to enact change on a micro-level in Cuba, while also understanding this is a problem on the global level that needs further action. From this, how much do we blame the Cuban government for the racism in the tourist industry, and how much do we blame the expectations of Western visitors? While class privileges via universal health and education systems and the elimination of private property all brought by Castro’s revolution certainly improved many facets of Cuban society, the racist mentality towards black Cubans historically grounded in colonization, slavery, institutionalized economic inequality, and nationalistic ideology persists.¹³¹

¹³⁰ De la Fuente, “Under Trump’s Revised Policy, Black Cubans Will Get Left Behind, Again.”

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