
CASTRO,

THE BLACKS,

AND

AFRICA

Carlos Moore

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TO

S h a w n a

K i m a

J o s y

M b i s i n

M a r c i a

Very little can be understood
about Cuba until it is realized
how ethnically African a country
it is.

Robin Blackburn, "Prologue
to the Cuban Revolution"

FOREWORD

Carlos Moore's study of the race factor in Cuba's internal history and in the evolution of its foreign policy is a remarkable scholarly endeavor. This is one of the most significant books available on contemporary Cuba. It addresses a classic "'non-topic'" in Cuban history: the race factor within Cuba. It examines a major theme of the past quarter century: Cuban policies toward Africa; and it assesses the significance of the race factor in the formation of those policies. Carlos Moore brings together an enormous amount of information not available anywhere else and explores themes rarely discussed with regard to Cuba, either in or out of that country. He argues his case vigorously.

The tone in this work is vigorous and at times harsh. Its judgments will be unpopular with many defenders and with many opponents of Cuba's revolutionary government. The former will dislike the truth that there is racism in Cuba today; the latter will dislike the truth that there has always been racism in Cuba. So the book will be profoundly unpopular among many Cubans who will deny that racism is a factor in Cuban history; and it will be intensely disliked, both by the Cuban government and by many of its enemies who live outside of Cuba.

Moore's central theme is that racism is an inherent part of the history of Cuba, a history shared by the whites who have ruled Cuba before and since the revolutionary victory in 1959, a history for which Cubans both in and outside of Cuba are responsible. His argument suggests that a revolution was warranted in Cuba to address the racial factor, among others, but that the revolution which prevailed was so consistent with the historic past of domination that it has not done so. Instead, like all Cuban governments since independence, the current one acknowledges that racism was a problem under the rule of its predecessors, but not now.

This is not just a scholarly book, however. It is also an angry book by someone who has lived through many of the experiences that inform the work. At times, there are some harsh judgments about individuals, governments, and large groups of people. Readers need not share this anger or these judgments (although, of course, they may) in order to learn from this book. I personally have learned a great deal

from reading it and discussing it with the author. Although I differ both with its tone and with its substance in many places, I am convinced that no one has been so able to unmask this hidden tragedy in Cuban history as Carlos Moore: the denial of racism there and, consequently, the enormous difficulty in confronting it.

It has been a common scholarly and popular argument that slavery in Cuba was not as harsh as in the United States and that race relations in Cuba were easier after the emancipation of the slaves than in the United States. This book, to its great credit, is not interested in the comparative study of such evils. It focuses its full attention on the evil of racism in Cuba, and it shows in some detail that, on its own terms, it is evil enough. Four major themes run through the discussion. Moore gives various weights to them; in discussing his approach, my own agreements and disagreements with him will also surface.¹

One major theme addresses a historical explanation. The race factor has been present in Cuba since the early days of the Spanish conquest and it remains so today. It shapes the way Cubans think about each other and the manner in which their governors have ruled. Nonetheless, Cuban governments and key elites have sought to deny the existence of racism and have behaved as if the race factor were generally inconsequential. The dominant ideology has been that there are no whites and no Blacks—only Cubans. I strongly agree with Moore that the race factor has been of decisive importance in Cuban history and that its workings led to a hierarchical system of subordination of Blacks. I also agree that a key to understanding the race factor in Cuba begins with focusing on the efforts of so many, especially those in power, to deny that it even exists. This pernicious paternalism has made confronting racism more difficult.

Unlike Moore (and unlike Cuba's revolutionary government), I believe there was a gradual process that, by the mid-twentieth century (after a bloody repression in 1912 and repeated abuses during the 1930s), had blunted the sharpest edges of racism in Cuba and permitted the gradual improvement of the social, economic, and political condition of Blacks. Part of this useful trend developed from the work of people who are not universally popular among Cubans (some would hate to be in each other's company): former dictator Fulgencio Batista, himself a mulatto who often tried to "pass for white"; the pre-revolutionary Liberal party; the pre-revolutionary Communist party; and the labor movement led by Lazaro Peña and Eusebio Mujal.

A second major theme addresses an explanation of the structure of the revolutionary regime's power. It argues that Blacks have suffered from the policies of the regime led by President Fidel Castro since the

revolutionary victory in 1959, not necessarily because the regime is anti-Black but because it is authoritarian. A regime that tolerates no formally organized opposition from any quarter and over any significant issue certainly does not tolerate it from Blacks over the race factor. The revolutionary regime has repressed efforts to establish movements in Cuba that seek to focus on the race factor; that seek to bring issues of importance to Blacks to the attention of leaders; that question the overwhelming presence of whites in the leadership; or that simply wish to promote social, cultural, or political associations among Blacks, focusing on specifically Afro-Cuban issues. From this perspective, the revolutionary regime is as harsh on Blacks as it is on any other groups wishing to pursue autonomous, and especially oppositional, activities in Cuba. I agree fully.

A third theme is surely the most controversial. The revolutionary regime might be called negrophobic. On cultural and ideological grounds, it is repressive of the culture of Blacks in Cuba. It has sought to extirpate Afro-Cuban religions, by fighting them directly or by seeking to transform them into artistic folklore. It denigrates traditional Afro-Cuban culture as barbaric. It accords no standing—other than as an academic curiosity—to African and Afro-Cuban languages in Cuba. It takes no deliberate actions to include Blacks in positions of authority, permitting the racism long ingrained in the society to keep Blacks in subordinate positions. Most crucially, it is more repressive toward Afro-Cuban religions than toward Roman Catholicism. It is also more repressive toward social, cultural, or intellectual groupings organized around Afro-Cuban issues than around other issues. It considers the associational expression of Afro-Cuban concerns and grievances especially unacceptable culturally, where the regime is radically integrationist, and ideologically, where it does not accept ethno-cultural variations in the homogeneous society it wants to build.

There is reason for ambivalence in assessing this theme. It is correct that the regime has been quite harsh in this way. It is also correct that it has focused on specific beliefs and practices that happen to be especially prevalent among, and significant for, Blacks in Cuba in the social, cultural, religious, and political spheres. I do not think it is correct that the regime is deliberately and consciously anti-Black, nor that it and its leaders are unusually more racist than has been the norm in the country's history. Why, then, is the result so tragic, oppressive, and disturbing?

One hypothesis is that the regime's apparent negrophobia at home results from the combination of the cultural burdens of the past with the authoritarian powers of the present and the peculiarities of

Marxism-Leninism on ethno-racial questions. Cuba's current rulers, like its past rulers, have sought to deny racism and to promote cultural assimilation, often with benevolent intentions—even if Blacks, as a result of both policies, are consigned to the bottom of the social stratification pyramid and deprived of their cultural traditions. Past rulers lacked the full powers needed to implement their policy preferences. With regard to the race factor, this incapacity resulted in much pluralism that permitted the flourishing of Afro-Cuban religions and the germination of Afro-Cuban politics and intellectual life. Cuba's current rulers have the power to impose their preferences and rely on an ideology that considers ethno-cultural variations superstructural phenomena to be overcome. It is this extraordinary combination of the past and the present that has had some negrophobic outcomes, damnable on their own terms, even though, in my judgment, they do not result from deliberately negrophobic intentions or policies.

The fourth theme of the discussion is the most consistent with the revolutionary regime's official policy: there have been improvements in the conditions of life for Blacks in Cuba since the Revolution. Moore accepts this, although he does not dwell on it. The revolutionary government abolished the vestiges of legal race discrimination; that did not amount to much, but it was still right. Moreover, because Blacks had been disproportionately concentrated at the bottom of Cuba's social stratification, government policies that sought to teach the illiterate, improve the health of the indigent, ensure a minimum caloric intake against hunger, and provide jobs for all, were bound to benefit Blacks disproportionately. These things have happened, to the Cuban government's credit, and Blacks have indeed benefited.

However, Blacks benefited because they were poor, and not because they were Black. Apart from the modest steps required to dismantle what remained of legal race discrimination, the Cuban government has not had explicitly "pro-Black" or "affirmative action" policies. And, at the top of the regime, those who rule are still white. This does not deny to the Cuban government the credit it deserves for improving the lot of the poor, but it underlines yet again how difficult it is for this regime to be conscious of the problem of being Black in Cuba and of the legitimate and enduring question of the meaning of Afro-Cuban traditions in Cuba. I think that Carlos Moore would share my criticism of the limits of the Cuban government's policies in this regard.

This book's publication is a milestone in the history of Cuba. It should launch a long-overdue discussion about a central issue in that

country's history—a country that has made the world, and especially Africa, an arena for its international activities. It will be a painful discussion because the subject itself is so. It should dispel myths about Cuba and about its revolution, which might enable the country and even the regime, were it to face up forthrightly to the issues raised here, to become the better for it. For those who are neither Cubans nor revolutionaries, the book will shed much light on the intricacies of the race factor in a society and for a government that are surrounded by and enmeshed in it but barely conscious of it. Never before has an author delved so thoroughly into the subject of race in the Cuban experience. This is, in short, a book that explores how a people and a revolution have worked hard to ignore a central fact they should have addressed long ago.

Moore's discussion of Cuban policy toward Africa from 1959 onwards likewise fills an important scholarly void. Most scholars who have described and analyzed this policy have focused on the period after 1975, because that is when the major interventions in Angola and in Ethiopia occurred and when the scope of Cuban policy in Africa became large and visible. Moore's work, in contrast, reaches a climax in 1972, when three major events coincided: Fidel Castro's first trip to Africa, Cuba's establishment of diplomatic and other relations with black English-speaking Caribbean countries, and Cuba's formal entrance into the Soviet-led Council for Mutual Economic Assistance. Thus, 1972 proved to be a turning point in Cuban history, setting the stage for several key Cuban policies in the years to come. Moore argues implicitly that the subsequent unfolding of events in Angola, Ethiopia, and elsewhere are but the consequences of a policy whose roots had been set much earlier. His task is to shed light on that important earlier time.

Moore's first conclusion needs stressing: the subject of a Cuban policy toward Africa does exist. Cuba's Africa policy in the 1960s was not that of a Soviet proxy, or puppet, or surrogate, or appendage. Cuba's Africa policy, above all, was made in Havana. It is not Moore's subject to examine all the intricacies of Soviet-Cuban relations in those years, but he shows the conflicts between those two governments, their jealousies, and their difficulty in collaborating on many policies for most of the 1960s. However, Moore also shows the construction of an effective Soviet-Cuban alliance by the end of the 1960s and beginning of the 1970s—a pattern consistent with other trends in Soviet-Cuban relations.

If Soviet dictates do not explain the origins and evolution of Cuban policy toward Africa, what, then, does? The first answer is strategy.

The Cuban government, and especially Fidel Castro, looked for opportunities abroad to project the influence of the Cuban revolution and to combat the United States and its allies. The search for opportunities is a central feature of Cuba's Africa policy and the surest guide through the maze of conspiracies, commitments, and deals made over the years. This opportunistic approach was also bold. Cuba deployed forces to help Algeria in its war with Morocco in 1963. Cuba deployed forces, led personally by Ernesto Ché Guevara, to help insurgents in the Congo (later renamed Zaire) fight against the Leopoldville government. Cuba made and broke deals with insurgents, such as Pierre Mulele, or government leaders, depending on changing circumstances. Some Cuban forces protected the governments of the Congo (Brazzaville) and of Guinea; other Cuban forces trained insurgents to fight against Portugal's colonial empire. Beyond Moore's argument, the recounting of these intricate, important, and little-known events is itself a fascinating account.

Moore insists that there was more to Cuban policy in Africa, however. One ideological dimension, which overlapped the strategic orientation, was solidarity with revolutionary states and movements seen as compatible with Cuba's vision of the "'good future.'" But a more significant ideological dimension, in Moore's judgment, is the race factor.

The impact of race on Cuban foreign policy, according to Moore, is not simple. Some black Cuban intellectuals, such as Walterio Carbonell, argued as early as 1959 for an Afrocentric Cuban foreign policy to defend the Revolution against its enemies abroad and to root it in the experience of Cuba's own black people. These ideas probably caught the imagination of the leadership. In fact, Fidel Castro over the years has increasingly made reference to the history Cuba shares with many African countries through the slave trade. He has been conscious of the external uses of Cuban demography as well as the internal uses of Cuban foreign policy. Africans, he may have thought shrewdly, would welcome advisers and troops from a partly black country; black Cubans, especially numerous among Cuban troops, would fight in wars overseas to support black governments. Moore shows the Cuban government's manipulation of racial symbols both in Africa and in Cuba to build support for Cuban government policies.

Moore insists that an additional reason for Cuba's entry into Africa was paternalism and disdain for the capacity of African leaders, governments, and movements to build their own future. Cuba would show them how to make and consolidate revolutions in the face of imperialist enemies. This controversial assertion is drawn from many

speeches and interviews and cannot easily be dismissed. It is one of the more troubling features of the story.

Strategy, ideology, and possible prejudice are combined in the person of Fidel Castro, who is the decisive actor in the drama that unfolds in the pages of this book. Ché Guevara also played an important supporting role, as did an increasing number of other Cuban leaders as Cuba's Africa policy became more complex.

The domestic dimension of Cuba's Africa policy is equally complex in its effects. On the one hand, Moore shows that some Cuban Blacks who identified with the revolutionary government rose rapidly through the ranks of government and Party and took charge of the implementation of important aspects of Cuba's Africa policy. On the other hand, Moore also shows that the Cuban government did not change most of its internal policies on matters of race even as it became more involved in Africa. The Cuban government remained intolerant of the independent expression of cultural and political ideas and behavior by Cuban Blacks. An independent Africa abroad did not make for an independent, albeit meta-phorical, Africa at home.

Nonetheless, the results of Cuba's Africa policies have been impressive. Cuba's presence has spread throughout the African continent. There has not been much opposition within Cuba to the support for African revolutionary states and movements. Cuba's insurgent allies in the Portuguese colonies eventually came to power. The presence and availability of Cuban troops has become a major power factor on that continent. In fact, Cuba is at least as significant as the more conventionally defined non-African major powers in Africa.

"Little Cuba," to use a phrase cited often in this book, plays war drums heard clearly and with effect across the oceans and throughout the lands of Africa. It is tragic that other drums that might sing within Cuba of the cultural, political, and religious expression of Afro-Cubans do not vibrate so freely and so joyously. That is the twin drama of the race factor in Cuba's own history and in its foreign policy—a drama painfully, articulately, and powerfully presented in the pages of this book.

Jorge I. Domínguez
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Harvard University

NOTE

1. I have addressed some of these themes in my writings. *Insurrection or Loyalty: The Breakdown of the Spanish American Empire* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press,

1980) deals in part with the race factor in Cuba at a crucial moment in the early nineteenth century. *Cuba: Order and Revolution* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1978) considers in part the condition of Blacks before and after the Revolution. See also my "'Racial and Ethnic Relations in the Cuban Armed Forces: A Non-Topic,'" *Armed Forces and Society* 2(2):273-290 (February 1976).

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PART ONE

**RACIAL POLITICS IN
REVOLUTIONARY CUBA**