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Señor Jim Crow Still Roosts in Cuba: A Comparative Analysis of Race and Resistance in the United States and Cuba

Leah P. Hollis

Abstract

After touring Havana, Cuba, with a group of African American Scholars in the fall of 2019, I am inspired to identify the subtle and explicit racist experiences that we endured.

A common message from those in the tourism industry is that Cubans love African Americans. This message was constant, yet it rang like a gong in our ears because the message did not match the treatment we received. In truth, this love was not for the African aspect of our identities but for the financial prosperity in the American part of our identities. The Cuban tour guide constantly announced the propaganda publicly that when Castro came to power in 1959 the government formally abolished racism. However, the undercurrent of racism saturated our visit. Proclaiming racism is abolished does not make it so; instead, the proclamation was an ostrich's head in the sand. The obvious was ignored for the postulated utopian racial harmony indoctrination.

Eradication of racism or other 'isms' involves a trajectory of social change from tolerance, then acceptance on the path to respectful inclusion. Centuries of racism are not whisked away with a few decades of government declaration and externally motivated pressure to change. These learned racially charged behaviors are derived from internal motivation and value systems that must be unlearned over time and across generations. Consequently, with the scholarship of other academics, I will utilize the self-determination theory to compare Cuba's race politics with the United States' own rocky history in confronting contentious race relations.

Keywords: *Cuban racism, self-determination, American Civil Rights*

Cuba and U.S. Similarities

Antón-Carrillo (2011) reflected on an evolving Cuban identity that includes looking to its Spanish descendants who aspire to a European-style society. Such evolution continues to embrace European values inclusive of social and cultural dominance over those of African descent (Antón-Carrillo, 2011). Just as the United States participated in the slave trade with the subsequent "Negro Question" on how society should deal with emancipated slaves, Cuba as well struggled with these questions.

The common practice from both the United States and Europe was to sequester and exclude persons of African descent who remained after slavery. If Cuba truly integrated those of African descent, Cuba would then lose the opportunity to be like the “civilized and developed nations in the European style” (Antón-Carrillo, 2011, p 329). Cuba wished to evolve with its sights on European Spain and its boot on African descendants.

Perhaps this animus is born from the Moors’ extended reign over Spain for eight centuries (Lane-Poole, 1896). During this period, the Moors developed advancements in mathematics, science and the law (Lakhtakia, 2011). Al-Khawarizmi was a renowned astronomer and mathematician; Sibawayh was deemed as a linguistic scientist; the Islamic culture brought new standards to art, literature, science and knowledge (Andersson & Djeflat, 2013). As masters of military science, their expansion of Arabic and Islamic culture occurred through many battles to capture various provinces and societies.

The Moors’ sovereignty sprawled through Jerusalem and the Levant, Persia, Egypt, and the Byzantines (Andersson & Djeflat, 2013). Their dominance also incorporated what is now known as modern Spain and Portugal (Andersson & Djeflat, 2013).

Fuchs (2008) explained that Moors could be light-skinned or dark-skinned, originating from North Africa, Spain, or the sub-Sahara region. With constant infighting and treachery amongst themselves, the Moors weakened and succumbed to Christian rule under Ferdinand and Isabella in 1492 (Lane-Stanley, 1896). With the final defeat of the Moors in Granada, Spain, many of the conquered Moors (simultaneously with the Jews) fled, were expelled or were forced to adopt Christianity (Fuchs, 2008).

The prevailing Christian Spaniards, who adopted some of the previous Arab influences in art and culture, widely persecuted the Moors, racialized the term “Moors,” and marginalized those from Moorish heritage (Fuchs, 2008). The Spanish marginalization and racial aversion for the Moors extended through the next phase of global history, one that spawned the slave trades, a time when people were ostracized because of race.

Less than a decade after the Moors were ousted, Africans were subjected to a deep hatred from European Spaniards and many were sold into slavery (Diouf, 1998, p. 17). In the ‘New World,’ the whites of the Americas and the Caribbean mass murdered many of the aboriginal population while focusing on the purity of the European (Latin) bloodline.

In the process of a massive population movement, this evolving American society became averse to racial mixing, except when the slave masters raped slaves for their own carnal pleasure. This historical backdrop colorized the worldviews of the “New World” society. Their internal and autonomous values embraced European gentility, not global and inclusive cosmopolitanism.

Self-Determination Theory

Researchers have confirmed that a major part of the human experience is engaging in what is labelled “self-determination” (Bartholomew, Ntoumanis, Ryan, Bosch, & Thøgersen-Ntoumani, 2011). But what is self-determination? Self-determination, which examines a person’s motivation, and the types of motivation, can provide insight into human behavior, creative expression, learning and health (Deci & Ryan, 2008). Further, self-determination has two types of expression, external or internal motivation (Gagné & Deci, 2005). Both types of motivation are significant contributors to human behavior, yet the internal and autonomous styles of motivation yield comparatively indelible behaviors.

External regulation or controlled motivation is influenced by reward, or punishment, and avoidance of shame (Deci & Ryan, 2008, p. 182). Controls such as remuneration and surveillance (Lepper & Green, 1975) interfere with one’s internal sense of autonomy (Gagné & Deci, 2005). The external pressure, whether from family, employment, organizations or government, fosters an urgency that one must behave in a certain manner. This external manifestation of self-determination occurs when people are controlled (Deci & Ryan, 2008).

In the Cuban example, external pressure from the founder/dictator forced the Cuban society to declare that racism is abolished; however, when such pressure dissipated, the internal motivation remained. Such external pressure seemingly ignores the internal value systems of prejudice.

By comparison, autonomous motivation arises from a person’s internal value system and sense of self (Deci & Ryan, 2008). If people are internally or autonomously motivated, they do not need regulation, prodding, rewards or punishments to guide their behavior. They are inspired by their values and social mores, which they genuinely embrace, to behave in a certain manner (Gagné & Deci, 2005).

When one considers the implications of both internal and external motivation as applied to racism and Cuban behavior regarding race prejudice, Castro as an external figure to the Cuban self is easily depicted as a dominating figure whose control resulted in the propaganda-filled anthem that racism was eradicated throughout Cuba. Cuban citizens were externally motivated to avoid shame or punishment and then motivated to verbally promote this new, perhaps mythical absence of racism.

Internally, however, Cuban society, like most other societies that had been subjected to centuries of imperialistic and race-based prejudice and the accompanying deportment, internally still harbors racial prejudice and acts accordingly—in contrast to the stated propaganda.

In other words, the descendants of Europeans in Cuba openly proclaim and thus reinforce the propaganda as externally defined by Castro, yet they have continued to harbor their internal prejudice.

Afro-Cubans as well would be motivated externally to support Castro's proclamation, yet as a controlled segment of society, they cannot act on their own value system to resist racial prejudices and practices without fear of shame and punishment. In short, the compromised self-determination has meant that Cubans regardless of race are a resultant of the motivations pushed by the external government control, and they are deprived of the right to act upon their respective value systems.

Comparatively, United States race relations have been steeped in a mosaic of ideals. These autonomous and internal values include the affinity of some citizens for reactionary and conservative right-wing positions, while some Americans can also subscribe to moderate and liberal positions.

Since its inception, the United States has exerted various controls, through the initial framing of its Constitution and other laws that only seemed to address the rights of white male property owners; it took the abolition of slavery and the following two Reconstruction amendments in the 1800s to promote civil liberties to a more inclusive set of its citizens.

Nonetheless, some basic values built into the United States Constitution such as the freedom of speech and the right to peacefully assemble for the redress of grievances have enabled disenfranchised and underrepresented groups to voice their malcontent with racism, sexism and homophobia. Underneath the controls that the United States has promoted, retracted and recast over the centuries, citizens often can still engage their internal and autonomous motivation.

This internal and autonomous latitude has allowed the creation of various hate groups, but the right to pursue autonomous action based on internal self-motivation has also yielded many thrusts to support the disenfranchised and the traditionally underrepresented. Thus, community internal motivation arguably led to the civil rights movement and desegregation of the 1950s and 1960s, the protests at Stonewall in 1969, stronger rights for women in education in the 1980s, advocacy for those with disabilities in the 1990s, and, of late, the Me Too# and Time's Up# movements.

Arguably, the drive to make choices and to evolve can be internal or external. Regardless of the impetus of motivation, the environment assists and supports one's choices (Sheldon et al, 2003). Such settings can exert a measure of control, allow latitude or remain neutral; therefore, a person's motivation also operates within a community, which can either help or hinder one's goals and actions.

Señor Jim Crow and Self-Determination

In the late 1950s, Castro came to power and subsequently declared that racism was abolished (Zurbano, 2013). First in Castro's March 22, 1959 presidential speech and then again in the 1962 Second Declaration of Havana, Cuba confirmed that the race issue was now non-existent (Morales Domínguez, Prevost, & Nimitz, 2013). However, it is not reasonable to assume that such a profound proclamation could instantly eclipse the racist practices infused into the Cuban culture from generations of colonialism (Morales Domínguez, Prevost, & Nimitz, 2013).

So it is that the European and American influences on Cuban culture before Castro came to power had and continue to inform race relations. These Castro proclamations, seeking to dissociate the island's society from 500 years of European and American imperialism, downplayed the persistence of an obvious racially-charged phenomenon, and thus were unable to eradicate it (Morales Domínguez, Prevost, & Nimitz, 2013). Continually declaring that racism was over in the presumed utopia of socialism, Afro-Cubans were unable to name the obvious ills of discrimination, let alone fight against the ramifications of bigotry, since such racism reportedly did not exist. To rail against, resist and protest threatened governmental control confirming time and again that racial animus was a thing of a capitalist past.

In fact, when we look through the body of master's and doctoral level research, we find that the issue of Cuba and race is typically not studied by Cuban social scientists on the island. Such work, if it is produced within Cuba, remains in a state of limbo, rarely if ever coming to press. Further, issues of race are not addressed on Cuban television, in the newspapers or via other mass media outlets (Morales Domínguez, Prevost, & Nimitz, 2013). Overall, throughout Cuban society, race has been erased as a viable topic for critical analysis.

Congruent with the situation in pre-civil rights era America, Cuban society privileged whites. They had better living conditions and their lighter skin enabled better access to jobs (Zurbano, 2013). In the United States, scholars and society have labeled this practice as Jim Crow segregation; in Cuba the practice had and has no name (as explicitly naming racism was forbidden) but the impact on those of African descent was indelible, analogous to social and economic disenfranchisement in America.

As Zurbano wrote:

Before 1990, black Cubans suffered a paralysis of economic mobility while, paradoxically, the government decreed the end of racism in speeches and publications. To question the extent of racial progress was *tantamount to a counter revolutionary act*. This made it almost impossible to point out the obvious: racism is alive and well (2013, p. 116).

Black Cubans, like all others stripped of the individual right of self-determination (Mithaug 1996; Hollis, 1998) and oppressed by the external government pressure, thus lost the right to protest discrimination and did not have the opportunity to amplify their individual voices into a strong collective voice of resistance.

In Cuba, Fidel Castro was the anti-racist voice, rebuking racism and discrimination, declaring that the revolution had terminated prejudice (Clealand, 2017). His speeches and rhetoric created a *tabula rasa*, a framework that forbids racism, without providing any form of remedial action to re-educate a resistant Cuba society that had been informed by centuries of internally motivated racial bias. When a community blatantly ignores the racism because the government has said to do so, such a disavowed position ironically allows racial stereotypes and practices to proliferate (Clealand, 2017). Perhaps this is similar to the rebirth of the Russian church after decades of official Communist atheism in the former Soviet Union or the outbreak of extreme nationalism in the regions of the former Yugoslavia.

Further, Castro's propaganda established an 'us' versus 'them' dichotomy in foreign affairs, as he attempted to distinguish Cuba from its nearest enemy. Whereas in the capitalistic United States "they" were continuously engaging in racial unrest, riots and social discord, such was not the case in Socialist Cuba. Why? In comparison to Cubans, "they" [the population of the United States] are racist, and subsequently, by the declared nature of ours, "we" [Cuban citizens] are anti-racist (Antón-Carrillo, 2011, p. 338).

Ironically, a paternalistic Cuban government thus succeeded in silencing the anti-racist and potentially authentic resistance in its country; Afro-Cubans could not effectively combat local racism as it meant also resisting the Castro dictatorship.

The Cuban "no racism exists here" propaganda and the country's anti-racism rhetoric could not deconstruct the deep racial divides and practices present in the very warp and woof of the country (Aguirre, 2002; Bonilla-Silva 2012). Control and structure enable oppression (Hollis, 2017a). Therefore, how easy is it to reverse engineer deeply-seated social prejudices? How well has a positively motivated Western Europe, for example, been able to eradicate anti-Semitism?

Close to fifty years after Castro ascended to power, it is apparent to this observer that the anti-racial communication and rhetoric, even if well intended, serves mostly to paint a superficial mirage and to generate cultural denial which ultimately boosts the endemic racism and anti-Black sentiment that still exists in Cuba in 2019. Further, with the government declaring racism dead in Cuba, Afro-Cuban citizens have not been enabled to even identify racist practices openly so as to challenge such oppression; again, this is because according to the government, such practices and oppressions are nonexistent.

This situation stands in contrast to that which prevails in the United States. Here, the civil rights movement emerged from individual suffering and group-wide concerns and it blossomed into a collective resistance on the part of millions of Blacks and whites. In 1954, Thurgood Marshall and others successfully argued against the idea of separate but equal in the Supreme Court case, *Brown v. The Board of Education*, ending those practices which had been enshrined in law via the reactionary 1896 *Plessey v. Ferguson* decision. A year later, the 1955 Montgomery Bus Boycott led by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. changed busing conditions for Blacks in the South. The 1961 Freedom Riders helped to desegregate interstate travel facilities (Martin, 2011).

Soon Blacks, whites, and others were raising their voices and risking their lives to openly and collectively challenge the prevailing racist politics in Virginia, South Carolina, Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi, and Louisiana. The civil rights struggle culminated with the 1963 March on Washington and continued through to such victories as the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, with its Title VII prohibiting discrimination in employment; these laws were followed by the subsequent adoption of additional civil rights laws, such as Title IX in 1972 (ending discrimination based on sex), pregnancy discrimination legislation in 1978, and the American with Disabilities Act in 1990.

None of these society-wide, deeply experienced liberation moments in the United States were possible in a Castro-dominated Cuba since the leader declared there was no need in Cuban society to address such problems.

In addition, not only did African Americans in the United States exercise the right to pursue their autonomous self-determination, they also had choices on how to resist oppression. The Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SLC) offered a Thoreau and Gandhi-inspired civil disobedience approach. Yet if one did not subscribe to the turn-the-other-cheek philosophy, other movements arose, which included the Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee and then, the Nation of Islam that recruited over 100,000 members in the 1960s. These provided an alternative option to exercise self-determination (Colley, 2014).

Black Americans, unlike Black Cubans, had a choice of not only to fight, but also how to fight, and how to pick up arms, if that was their decision. One of the most successful options that emerged from such internal self-determination was through the existing justice system. The NAACP's commitment to fight racism in court also supported the NAACP Legal Defense Fund (Tushnet, 1994). The Urban League, the Congress of Racial Equality, and others were active in the battle. The fight for equality included Tennessee Governor Frank Clement calling out the National Guard to escort Black students to Clinton High School in 1956, as it did President Eisenhower calling upon the Arkansas National Guard in 1957 to integrate Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas (Drone, 2005).

The same strategies to desegregate were employed in Florida, Texas, Mississippi, and Louisiana (Drone, 2005).

Additional expressions of self-determination included the many movements nationwide, developing everywhere. Many were led by the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., who delivered countless speeches and wrote about equity in labor for both races. Others that were prominent included the work of Malcolm X at Temple #7 in Harlem, New York, and the struggles highlighted by the Black Panthers and their community building efforts in Oakland, California, seeking to expose the diversity of resistance, a resistance that is not homogeneous in status, approach, or acceptance. Whether one chose the “any means necessary” cry of Malcolm X or Martin Luther King Jr.’s civil disobedience prescriptions, the underrepresented and disenfranchised American populations relied on their internal and autonomous self-determination, though many had to fight through hoses, dogs and bombings to fight for, and often achieve, social and economic equality.

I do not intend to elevate one form of struggle in recent American history over another, or to engage in a philosophical dispute over which civil rights path was more palatable or acceptable. Here I wish to maintain only that these examples illustrate the choices and variety of avenues for resistance that became available in the United States for Blacks and their allies to change fundamental American racial bigotry. Though a painful and bloody part of American history in which Blacks had long endured more oppression than whites (Hollis, 2017; Hollis, 2018; Kwate & Goodman, 2015; St Jean & Feagin, 2015), such resistance and struggle have afforded some opportunity to those disenfranchised American populations to change the situation. By contrast, Cuban society is just coming to terms with honestly and openly naming the racist ills which still remain largely unaddressed.

Jim Crow Roosts in Cuba

As a declared socialist society, Cuba continues to feel the pain of being shut off from much of the world economically and socially. The hip 1957 Chevy Taxis are an emblematic icon for tourists seeing the romantic allure of classic cars. Yet in reality, these cars signal the beginning of a time warp for Cuba, suspended in the 1950s in many ways, in ideology and commerce. How many today recall that until Castro assumed power in 1959, hotels, barbershops and beaches were reserved for whites (Darlington, 2009), similar to parallel Jim Crow practices in the United States.

Blacks in central Cuba during the middle 1990s protested against work conditions which were pushing the Black community into prostitution and other underworld crime in order to earn a suitable living (Binns, 2013).

In 2009, over 60 prominent African Americans, including Cornel West, Ruby Dee and Jeremiah Wright, openly protested that Cuban officials were harassing their Afro-Cuban citizens and obstructing their civil rights. They specifically called for an end to “the unnecessary and brutal harassment of Black Cubans who defend human rights” (Darlington, 2009). These calls were occasioned by the fact, among other instances of prejudice, that darker-skinned Blacks are still excluded from lucrative Cuban job opportunities in tourism and hospitality.

In contemporary Cuba, interaction with the mechanisms of economic tourism is still quietly reserved for lighter-skinned Cubans. Such racial bias was evident during our Havana tour in which all the service workers in the airport were light-skin or white; all of the five-star hotel staff members were light-skinned or white, just as the tour guides and drivers were light-skinned or white.

Similarly, lighted-skinned or white students earn a majority of post-secondary degrees in Cuba’s free educational system (Binns, 2013). Apparently, Jim Crow is alive and roosting comfortably in Cuba. Binns specifically wrote:

The people have been conditioned to believe that there is no racism here and that there are no races, just Cubans. This is all very beautiful as an idea but in reality, things are different. If you are Black in Cuba you are thought of as inferior and the darker you are, the worse it is. You see there is this huge gap between what the state says and what it wants us to believe and what is really going on (Binns, 2013, p. 7).

Race relations in the United States during the 1950s were not much better than Cuban race relations. American blackface, lynchings, open segregation, racial jokes and racially-driven sexual abuse were frequently encountered.

The comparative difference between the U.S. and Cuba today results from the fact that United States citizens were left the wiggle room of self-determination. They had the constitutional right to act on their internal motivations, to seek a redress of grievances while grappling with external government control reluctant at times to uphold desegregation legislation. This freedom yielded a variety of manifestations such as the end of segregated water fountains and segregated accommodations, and denial of services. Most whites had long expressed their internal motivation to stay segregated but simultaneously, Black citizens and their allies arose to express their autonomous self-determination. They sought to end racial segregation and racial hatred and, in general, they succeeded.

Though the separate but equal doctrine was struck down in 1954, five years before Castro struck down racial discrimination via executive edict, the United States spent several decades, and even into the twenty-first century, cajoling, shaping the internal motivation of the country's consciousness to be more tolerant and inclusive of racial differences. Although racial prejudice had been woven into American culture since the advent of slavery, the people of the United States have been continuously grappling with these problems. Optimistically, the internal and autonomous self-determination of those advocating for racial justice will continue to make strides.

Conclusion: American and Cuban Self Determination in 2020

Cuban society has been stifled in its general desire to improve race relations; much of this is based on the external motivation of Castro declaring the end of racism instead allowing for a process to emerge analogous to those that have done so in the U.S., with its greater latitude for social action. Even the minor latitude permitted in the United States generated the autonomous self-determination of Black Americans to diminish racist practices.

Government control in Cuba has made advances in inclusive health care systems and in government-sponsored employment; as a result, the Black population in Cuba is deemed one of the healthiest in the Americas (Binns, 2013; Smith, 1986). By contrast, in the United States, Blacks and African Americans remain in the lower socioeconomic strata, often struggling to obtain health care until Obama's Affordable Care Act in 2010.

Though Cuban advances in health care and education are notable, such advances are not a product of the will of the people, but they have arisen as a result of the will of the government. The Cuban people's internal motivation is stifled. In the United States, internal and autonomous self-determination forges new and critical pathways in racial justice, economic justice and environmental justice. Young people with their internal motivation have grown weary of older generations who seemingly are inert about global warming (Gifford & Nilsson, 2014; Grønhøj & Thøgersen, 2017, Thunberg, 2019). In their resistance, younger generations also use social media to highlight racialized gun violence and assault against women (Brown, Ray, Summers & Fraistat, 2017; Bonilla & Rosa, 2015; Gallagher, Reagan, Danforth & Dodds, 2018). These protests are possible because of the internal self-determination afforded in American society.

We may not agree with all aspects and modes of protest, resistance and advocacy, but the right to engage in such has allowed for community evolution. While the results are far from perfect, in the United States there has been a social evolution nonetheless in race relations. For Cuba, by contrast, the attempt to address race relations has been driven not by self-determination of the people but by a perhaps well-intentioned but naïve government-imposed propaganda program that has systemically asphyxiated the internal self-determination of the disenfranchised.

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