Esteban Morales Domínguez


In sixteen years researching Cuba, I have witnessed how some contemporary Cuban scholars balance academic discourse with political correctness. In Race in Cuba, Esteban Morales fails that balancing act. His attempt to write about race in Cuba while defending the Revolution results in contradictions and inconsistencies as he struggles with admitting the existence of racism while stressing the Revolution’s “magnanimous humanist work” (p. 62). Astute readers will notice the slippery maneuvers of academic and political discourse he makes while deciphering the political contours of discussions of race in Cuba. Morales complains about “insufficient debate on race” in Cuba (p. 81), yet the quick sales of an earlier book he wrote on the subject (2007) can at least be taken to indicate that there is an interested readership for the topic. Race in Cuba includes a preface by August Nimtz and Gary Prevost, fifteen chapters from the 2010 Spanish version, three new chapters, and a glossary for Anglophone readers. Despite the translators’ expressed goal of giving “fidelity” to the author’s voice “even at the risk of repetition” (p. 16), the book suffers from convoluted passages and frequent lack of clarity.

Part of this book’s political agenda involves placing Morales at the center of debates about race in Cuba and showing a subtle disregard of scholarship on race produced outside the island. Foreign scholarship, not incorporated in the text, is merely referred to as “relevant research” (pp. 126, 101), and what Pérez Sarduy and Stubbs (1993:25) have called the “richness and diversity of Cuban writing on race” is neither properly acknowledged nor engaged. Other works on race are relegated to a 26-page review of the literature. Failure to include local and foreign scholarship on race, as well as social scientific literature on racism, results in awkward statements and problematic conceptualizations. For example, while Morales condemns the United States’s “inculcation of American ‘scientific’ ideas of race,” there is no critique of Fernando Ortiz’s ideas on race and crime (pp. 32–33). He also endorses the belief in Spain’s leniency with “cultures of African origin” (p. 120), which is clearly challenged by the history of slavery in Cuba. Morales’s assertion that the “race issue” has received “scant attention” in Cuban history books (p. 126) is problematic. Finally, Morales overlooks Tomás Fernández Robaina’s scholarship on Gustavo Urrutia and gives no attention to open spaces for discussion on race such as the 2002 “Último jueves” meeting organized and published by the Temas collective.

Race in Cuba moves back and forth between categorical denials of racism in Cuba and acknowledgments of its existence—an existence presented as
“inherited,” “transferred” or “bequeathed” to Cubans from the past and often involving the United States. Thus, Morales’s balancing act involves a contradictory admission of internal problems alongside an assertion that the blame lies elsewhere. He repeatedly claims that “institutional racism does not exist” (e.g., p. 190), but mentions the lack of racial inclusion and diversity in public education and state-control spheres. For him, if racism is “lurking” in Cuba (p. 124), it is to be found in the family, individuals (pp. 20, 63), and “some institutions” (p. 175). Existing theoretical literature on institutional racism would have been beneficial here.

Chapter 3, “A Model for the Analysis of the Racial Problem in Contemporary Cuba” includes little that could be described as either theory or methodology. The “variables” (pp. 43–46) are simply historical periods or combination of words with neither a coherent statement of what relationships they have, nor a hint of solid empirical research to illustrate an argument. Morales’s flirting with affirmative action as an alternative to Cuba’s racial discrimination problems is selective. Chapters translated from the Spanish edition rarely mention it, possibly because of its association with the United States; Morales writes more freely about it in the new chapters for this edition. Despite previous contributions to discussions about race in Cuba, this book presents its author as the official voice over other writers (local and foreign) that have contributed to the discussion in recent years. It opens a window on the politics of race and discussions of it in the island, yet without documenting the “efforts to hush” the discussion (p. 126) or analyzing the official “silence” on race from 1962 to 2009 (p. 87). In what I would like to think were editorial slips, Morales states that Blacks in Cuba have “problems of identity, ... tend not to have a recognized history, [and] have a lower cultural level and less self-esteem” than Whites (pp. 24, 177). Such statements would confirm his problematic assertion that “the dominant thinking about race in Cuba today is what the liberals of the nineteenth century took up under the leadership of José A. Saco” (p. 85). One is left hoping that other voices will soon be translated.

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