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Mark Q. Sawyer

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Racial Politics in Post-Revolutionary Cuba

Using interviews, as well as survey and archival research, this book analyzes race relations under the Castro regime and places the Cuban revolution in a comparative and international framework. In doing so, Sawyer challenges other scholarly arguments either that the regime has eliminated racial inequality or that it has been profoundly racist.

By providing a balanced view of race relations, this book shows how static racial ideology has remained since the revolution and how Cuba has not become a racial democracy, but has done more than any other society to eliminate racial inequality. In fact, the current implementation of market reforms, especially tourism, has exacerbated these inequalities. Despite these shortcomings, the regime remains popular among blacks because they perceive their alternatives of the United States and the Miami exile community to be far worse.

Mark Q. Sawyer currently holds appointments as an associate professor with the Department of Political Science and with the Bunche Institute for African American Studies at UCLA. He is currently on leave until 2005 as a postdoctoral Fellow in the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation Scholars in Health Policy Program at the University of California at Berkeley and will be a visiting professor at the Harvard University Department of African American Studies. In 1999, he received his Ph.D. in political science from the University of Chicago. He joined the faculty at UCLA in 1999 and has taught undergraduate and graduate courses on the politics of the African diaspora, urban politics, African American political thought, and a general education cluster in interracial dynamics. Professor Sawyer has published articles in journals that include *The Journal of Political Psychology*, *Perspectives on Politics*, and *SOULS*.

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“Anyone who eats a yam . . .” Havana community mural art. Courtesy of the author.

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MARK Q. SAWYER

University of California, Los Angeles



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For my parents, Ernest and Theresa Sawyer, with love

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Introduction

In 1997, I stepped off a Cubana Airlines plane in Havana, having to that point experienced the mystery of modern Cuba only as a prospective researcher and tourist. There were several other Americans on the flight. We stood in a queue waiting to enter the country. When I arrived at the Customs check, the officer took my passport and motioned me to a side room. Two black Cuban guards moved to my sides and escorted me into an area with a small metal table and a chair.

In the room, they first patted me down and then asked me to sit. My ear had not yet attuned to Cuban Spanish, so my responses were quite slow. First, they asked me where I was from. I responded, “The United States” and showed them my papers. Unsatisfied, they asked, “Where are you really from?” I became annoyed and thought I should get more specific. “Chicago,” I replied. They did not seem satisfied and countered, “But where were you born?” By this time, I was deeply confused and unclear as to how to respond. I replied, “Chicago.”

They looked at each other and seemed to agree on the next question: “Where are your parents from – where were they born?” I responded, “Chicago and Alabama, the United States.” At this point, they seemed confused. One took a second look, and said with relief, “So you’re not Cuban?” I responded, “No.” The other then asked, “Not your family? But you look Cuban.” Confused, I just shook my head and sat there. They looked at each other, laughed, waved me out of the room, and helped me through Customs with my bags after asking some friendly personal questions.

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At first, I was quite flabbergasted by the event. How could I be mistaken for Cuban? I had never in my life been told I looked American, so what did it mean to “look Cuban”? Also, how did race mark me for differential treatment and scrutiny? The irony was that, in the Customs officials’ eyes, my blackness made me “Cuban” and marked me as a possible native or exile returning home, yet at the same time it made me subject to increased scrutiny and perhaps the presumption of criminality or even terrorism. The legal scholar and critical race theorist Devon Carbado notes in an article on his emigration from Great Britain to the United States that only through an encounter with racist members of the Los Angeles Police Department did he become “American.” Carbado writes: “I became American long before I acquired citizenship. Unlike citizenship, black racial naturalization was always available to me, even as I tried to make myself unavailable for that particular Americanization process” (2002, 946). Just as Carbado was introduced to the problematics of race within the United States, I was introduced to the experience of race in Cuba. My racial identity marked me as Cuban and “other” simultaneously; it meant I was both part of the Cuban nation and singled out for special scrutiny.

Racialized experiences are common throughout the diaspora, but much is at stake in exploring these experiences within Cuba. The Cuban Revolution has been widely hailed for having solved the race problem domestically and internationally through socialism and for supporting antiracist and anticolonial struggles worldwide. The view from the ground in Cuba, however, indicates that the race situation on the island nation is much more complex. Before the revolution, blacks faced substantial discrimination in all walks of Cuban life. Cuba’s was a highly unequal society based upon race that at times experimented with Jim Crow-style policies. More frequently, however, it was a society in which blacks held formal citizenship status but lived under highly unequal terms. Discrimination was practiced in important organs of civil society like schools, unions, professional organizations, and private clubs. The Cuban Revolution’s policies greatly transformed Cuba’s racial, political, social, and economic legacy. The Cuban Revolution eliminated racial exclusion in those areas of civil society where it was practiced and transformed many of the material conditions of blacks in positive ways. Blacks benefited from higher literacy rates created by better access to education. Furthermore, blacks took advantage of

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better income distribution, new opportunities in professions, and an expanded health system that greatly increased life expectancy (de la Fuente 1995).

Yet, to some degree, the same contradictory situation of black inclusion and inequality that could be seen in the post-independence period has also characterized the revolution. In Cuba today, Afro-Cubans are embraced as “authentic” Cubans and the primary supporters of the regime at the same time that they are constructed as “socially dangerous” (de la Fuente 2001). Following brief periods of improvement and longer periods of stagnation, and partly as a result of the collapse of the Soviet Union and the ongoing influence of pre-existing racial disparities, racial inequality is again growing in Cuba. Job discrimination against Afro-Cubans in the tourist sector and their unequal access to dollars through remittances from the United States exacerbate the problem. Daily life in Cuba is filled with contradictions: While the large number of black police officers signals the unprecedented ways in which blacks have been integrated into Cuban society since the revolution, for example, the ways in which these officers tend to single out blacks for harassment and scrutiny indicate that racial stereotypes and inequality are alive and well.

This book seeks to unlock such contradictions, to better understand how racial inequality has persisted in Cuba despite substantial efforts by the government to create equality and even stronger efforts to convince Cubans and the international community that the nation has solved its race problem. Admittedly, this is quite a thorny area in which to tread. For a variety of reasons, racial equality has become a central part of the Cuban Revolution’s international and domestic reputation. The ongoing experiment that is the Cuban Revolution has been as much about race as it has been about attempts to institute socialism and develop both Cuban nationalism and Third World internationalism. Thus, there is much at stake in this analysis.

It is an understatement to suggest that racial issues in Cuba are complex. The regime has done more than the government of any other nation, perhaps, to address the problem of racial inequality, yet it has taken some missteps. This book will examine the approach of the Cuban Revolution to pursuing color-blind, class-based means of solving racial problems, and it will explore the limits of that approach. But as far as race relations are concerned, the revolution cannot be

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examined as a clear point of demarcation in Cuba's history. The legacy and acknowledgment of racial mixture, as well as denials of the existence of racism, are key pre-revolutionary constructs that have influenced race relations on the island after the revolution. These constructs were themselves shaped by Cuba's colonial legacy of slavery and the unequal inclusion of blacks in the nation at the moment of independence. Critical events and developments in Cuban racial history, like racial violence against blacks who organized an independent black political party at the turn of the twentieth century, helped to structure race relations within the context of the revolution.

I argue that racial inequality has persisted in post-revolutionary Cuba as a result of ideological and structural factors, some of which existed prior to the revolution and others of which were products of, or exacerbated by, events following the revolution. The ideology of Latin American exceptionalism – which denied the existence of racism and suppressed black agency – was a significant factor in preventing more comprehensive racial reforms before and after the revolution. Furthermore, the unequal education of blacks in the pre-revolutionary era, as well as their location in poorer neighborhoods and regions and their participation in the sugar sector of the economy, had a substantial impact on relative racial inequality after the revolution. During the revolution, the ideology of Marxism combined with the ideology of Latin American exceptionalism to limit reforms so that class-based solutions, rather than potentially more effective race-specific measures, were proposed to eliminate the problem of blacks' relative inequality.

Yet behind such specific causes of racial inequality in Cuba has been the influence of broader structural changes in Cuban politics and society; the specific story of the Cuban Revolution is important, but it also may contain lessons about racial politics in general. The Cuban Revolution raised questions about the effects of recognizing multiracial categories and the benefits and limits of color-blind policies in eliminating racial hierarchy that are still in the process of being answered. The revolution allows us to examine the interaction between race and class in a socialist state attempting to produce a classless society and to assess the similarities and differences between the effects of liberal and Marxist ideologies on racial politics. This approach enables us to witness the simultaneous acknowledgment and denial of racial problems in Cuba that is a hallmark of color-blind state discourse. We are also able

to analyze the variable terms of racialized inclusion that are at work throughout the modern nations of the Americas. With the advance of capitalism and the devolution of the state in the Cuban economy, furthermore, Cuba may now be on a convergent path with societies like those of the United States and Brazil in terms of race. Looking at the cultural, political, and international legacy of the Cuban Revolution, then, can yield insights for those concerned about racial politics in the United States and elsewhere in the world.

This book explores the evolution of Cuban ideology and policies concerning race in order to examine, first, whether there is in fact racial hierarchy in Cuba today. If it does exist, why has it persisted through more than forty years of socialist government? The book's central argument is that racial politics within Cuba have followed patterns of opening and retrenchment that have been driven by the need of the state to mobilize blacks to support state projects and to protect the state from hostile forces. Once the state's projects have been completed or the threats against it neutralized, it has consolidated around new racial orders. Within this process, racial ideology has played a critical role in setting the boundaries for improvement on racial issues and providing justifications for retrenchment. The mechanisms of racial change and of the consolidation of racial orders are not unique to Cuba. In understanding them, we can come to understand racial politics more generally and to arrive at conclusions that allow for further comparison.

The approach of this book, therefore, is explicitly transnational – transnational both in the sense that international factors drive racial politics and in the sense that racialization is frequently thought of and experienced in transnational and comparative terms. Racialized experiences have common threads that transcend national boundaries in a way that has been consciously recognized by leaders, activists, and everyday people. International politics are, in this sense, a powerful factor in “domestic” racial politics. I argue explicitly that Cuba, the United States, and Africa have played critical roles in one another's racial histories. As a consequence, we must focus on transnational flows of people and ideology in order to understand completely the historical evolution of racial politics on the island. Specifically, we must examine the Cold War interaction among nations and its impact on racial politics.

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Chapter 1 proposes a theory to explain why racial hierarchy is so persistent, and racial progress so sporadic, in Cuba. The “race cycles theory” outlines the relationship among racial progress, mechanisms like state crisis, and the influence of racial ideology. I argue in Chapter 1 that Cuban racial ideology is characterized by what I call “inclusionary discrimination.” While mechanisms like state crises create openings for racial progress, the ideology of inclusionary discrimination encourages the ongoing marginalization of Afro-Cubans in Cuban social, economic, and political life. The race cycles theory and the idea of inclusionary discrimination improve upon existing models of racial politics by introducing a dynamic model of racialization.

Chapter 2 uses the model developed in Chapter 1 to look at racial politics in pre-revolutionary Cuba. It argues that the Cuban War of Independence represented a significant opening for Afro-Cubans, who pressed for freedom and equality in the context of the struggle for independence. Following independence, racist beliefs surfaced that justified racist attacks on independent black organizations as white elites sought to consolidate their power around a new racial order that made blacks junior partners in the new nation. Cuban elites developed a myth of racial democracy – and a fear of black insurgency – that justified racial violence and denied the existence of racial inequality. This closure represented a form of state consolidation.

The pattern of opening and closure appeared again during the Cuban Revolution, which followed similar ideological scripts. Examining the Cuban Revolution, Chapter 3 shows that the initial change in regime generated great reforms and a comparative embrace of blacks. Following the crisis created by the change of regime, however, Castro’s government consolidated its power by curtailing the freedoms of organizations in general and those of black organizations in particular. The regime also blended a version of the old myth of racial democracy with the new idea that socialism had eliminated Cuban racial inequality. While blacks have not reached parity with whites under Castro’s regime, they have nevertheless benefited greatly from redistributive efforts and from the economic growth created by socialism and aided by Soviet subsidies.

The third chapter also examines how progress toward racial equality was made when Cuba committed thousands of troops to supporting the MPLA in Angola against UNITA and the South African government.

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The Cuban mobilization opened up new discussions on the island about race and created both greater black representation in positions of power and a new acceptance of black culture. Following the victory in Angola, a new crisis emerged. The looming collapse of the Soviet Union and the increasingly threatening stance of the Reagan administration created, because of the need to mobilize support for the regime, further openings for racial advance. For the first time, the Castro regime suggested the possibility of instituting affirmative action policies. However, the ensuing economic collapse was so great that it thwarted these mobilization efforts. The economic retraction caused by the fall of the Soviet Union made it impossible to expand opportunities for blacks. The regime created a new hybrid socialist/capitalist economy, and the new order again asserted the myth of racial democracy.

Chapter 4 takes a historical step backward and examines the interaction between 1960s and 1970s Black Nationalists from the United States and the Castro regime. The chapter sheds light on the contradictions between Cuba's domestic racial policy, which attacked black organizations and black autonomy, and its international policy, which supported organizations like the Black Panther Party. In doing so, this chapter provides a clear example of the limits of the Castro regime's racial politics as experienced by activists from the United States. Their experiences illuminate the contradictions of inclusionary discrimination as well as the transnational and comparative nature of black politics. The chapter shows how the experiences of U.S.-based activists and leaders in Cuba helped foment an ideological divide between U.S.-based cultural nationalists, who saw race as the primary source of black oppression and rejected socialism, and U.S.-based revolutionary nationalists, who saw socialism as essential to solving racial problems and who were, in consequence, much less critical of the Castro regime's approach to race in Cuba.

Chapter 5 looks at race in contemporary Cuba. Drawing on in-depth interviews, it shows that racial discrimination is still perceived as a problem by Afro-Cubans. The chapter also demonstrates that the new capitalist economic order is creating significant inequalities based upon race: Whites have greater access to remittances from abroad and employment in the new, lucrative tourist industry, while blacks are frequently forced into criminal or black market activities in order to survive. In conjunction with subscribing to myths of racial democracy,

many Cuban whites hold that black disadvantage in the new economy is due to their inherent inferiority. The professed gains of the revolution have become a justification for inequality.

Chapter 6 uses public opinion surveys I conducted in Havana in 2000 and 2001 to test the existence of racial hierarchy, the salience of race in daily life, and the effect of race on political attitudes in Cuba. The chapter challenges notions that race is not salient in Cuba and shows that race profoundly structures attitudes about Cuban racial issues, politics, and economics. Race is also a determinant of several key measures of life chances; blacks are at the bottom of a stair-step racial hierarchy in Cuba, and whites are at the top. I argue that despite persistent inequality, Afro-Cubans generally support the current regime because of both its past successes and their pessimism about leadership alternatives like the Miami exile community.

Chapter 7 examines the racial politics of the Miami exile community and suggests that the conservative leadership of the community has been at best insensitive with regard to racial issues. The chapter looks at a number of historical incidents and examines survey data that compares Cuban racial attitudes with those of other major groups of Latinos in the United States. I argue that the exile community's general tendency to conflate the struggle for racial equality with communist sympathies and its racial insensitivity have made it hopelessly out of step with the citizens of Cuba, who have become increasingly darker since the revolution.

Finally, the Conclusion examines how well the empirical case of Cuba fits the race cycles theory and the idea of inclusionary discrimination described in Chapter 1. It summarizes the issues discussed throughout the book and considers the future of Cuba and its revolution. The Conclusion also looks at the implications of what I have demonstrated about the Cuban experiment for racial politics and policy in the United States and beyond.