

# **Afro-Cuban, African-American Solidarity Movements and the Future of Cuba: An African-Centered Political Ecology Perspective**

by

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## **Abstract**

This paper critically analyzes Afro-Cuban, African-American solidarity movements and contemporary Cuba from an African centered political ecology perspective. It considers that historically solidarity movements have generally supported the Cuban revolutionary project because of its stated commitment to economic and racial justice. Thus, this exercise addresses four key areas: theoretical assumptions of African-centered political ecology; the historical development of U.S. foreign policy toward Cuba, contextualizing the Obama administration's shift from Cold War strategies; the ideological tendencies that have historically shaped African-American, Afro-Cuban solidarity movements; and the linkages that exist between race, socioeconomic inequality, and the environment, and its implications for ideological clarity within African-American, Afro-Cuban solidarity work.

**Keywords:** Afro-Cuban, Political Ecology, Cuba, Pan-Africanism

## **Introduction**

Since the age of European exploration African diasporic communities have formed transnational linkages to negotiate and resist European cultural hegemony and economic exploitation. The relationship between Afro-Cubans and African-Americans is an outgrowth of this history. For over three centuries solidarity movements have endured, each characterized by problems peculiar to both the external and internal realities of Afro-Cubans and African-Americans.

With the death of Fidel Castro, the Obama administration's reversal of Cold War isolationist policies, and the ascendancy of the administration of Donald Trump, new conditions have materialized requiring a reassessment of previously held assumptions. This discussion seeks to consider the relevance of an African-centered political ecology to our understanding of contemporary Cuba and ideological tendencies that have historically shaped Afro-Cuban, African-American solidarity movements. It argues that ideological models that inform Afro-Cuban, African-American solidarity work are typically shaped by an urban bias which privileges urban centered, growth oriented socioeconomic values. Hence, an African centered political ecology perspective seeks to shift movement discourse toward the understanding that important linkages exist between racial inequality, economic inequality, and environmental degradation. These connections have profound implications for how we understand (1) the historical and contemporary problems of Afro-Cuban communities, (2) the successes and failures of the Cuban Revolution and its stated commitment to racial and economic justice, and (3) the impact of contemporary, U.S. foreign policy on Cuba. This discussion will unfold in four stages. First, we will delineate the core, theoretical assumptions of an African-centered political ecology. Second, we will explore the historical development of U.S. foreign policy towards Cuba, contextualizing the Obama administration's shift away from Cold War strategies. Third, we will analyze ideological tendencies that have historically shaped African-American, Afro-Cuban solidarity movements. Finally, we will consider the connections that exist between race, socioeconomic inequality, and the environment, and its implications for ideological clarity within African-American, Afro-Cuban solidarity work.

## **An African-Centered Political Ecology: Theoretical Considerations**

Definitionally, an African-centered political ecology is a reformulation of ancient principles undergirding indigenous African societies that seeks to explore the historical development of African communities through an eco-philosophical lens. It attempts to expand the contours of Africana critical theory by demonstrating the salience of indigenous African socio-ecological praxis to our understanding of the contemporary problems of African people. Therefore, it contributes to a global dialogue over the need for human communities to refashion our relationship to the earth in an effort to create a sustainable future. African-centered political ecology has two broad concerns. The first is the degree to which communities of African descent have constructed paradigms of human development and liberation that reflect an *urban bias*. This influences how one understands the relationship between individuals and society, definitions of "freedom", conceptualizations of what socioeconomic institutions are appropriate, how society engages in the construction of the built environment, and how communities perceive and interact with nature.

The urban bias has its origins in the evolution of Western civilization, specifically modernity. It should not be confused simply with the notion of constructing densely populated areas most often called “cities” and “towns”. It is a culturally defined development philosophy. The urban bias is characterized by “(1) an anthropocentric, secular perception of nature, (2) the hegemony of mass consumption and industrialization, (3) the devaluation of indigenous, rural knowledge, (4) mass rural to urban migration, and (5) the concentration of political and economic power within urban centers.” (Densu, 2017, p. 4) As an outgrowth of Western Modernity the urban bias has its roots in the enclosure movement, European slavery and colonialism. The same psycho-spiritual, intellectual, socioeconomic and technological patterns of development that gave birth to Liverpool, England; Seville, Spain; Paris, France, and Lisbon, Portugal, would in turn reproduce themselves as an extension of Europe’s imperialism in the Americas and Africa. In addition, it would serve as the “ideal” model of nation building pursued by anti-imperialist and progressive nationalists in the post-colonial era. This is problematic from the perspective of an African-centered political ecology and is central to the current problems facing African communities globally.

Furthermore, an African-centered political ecology is concerned with how indigenous African conceptions of nature and socio-ecological praxis can be used to create sustainable, socioeconomic and technological models of development. It also seeks to unearth ways that indigenous African ecological knowledge can inform African social movements by *recentering the land question* within movement organizing and the development of strategies and tactics to resolve contemporary social, economic and political problems. For an African-centered political ecology, racial, and economic inequality are intimately linked to the devaluation and subjugation of nature. Indigenous and rural African life-ways are perceived as valuable in their capacity to offer sustainable alternatives to modern industrial oriented paradigms of socioeconomic organization. Hence, for the purpose of this discussion it considers the strategies of rural development and agrarian reform as solutions to racial and economic inequality. In addition, in the era of mass consumption and climate change it suggests that indigenous African perceptions of nature as “Mother” challenges our view of the earth as simply raw materials for industry. The notion that all life forms, both animate and inanimate, have a purpose independent of their economic use value to human communities, are important ideas to subvert the modern illusion of perpetual economic growth as ideal, and its negative impact on the earth’s ecosystems.

Historically, Afro-Cuban, African-American solidarity movements, the Cuban Revolution and U.S. foreign policy have differed, in nuanced and blatantly contradictory ways, around the questions of racial and economic inequality. At the same time they have been “united” by their commitment to the urban bias. We will explore this phenomenon and its implications for our understanding of contemporary Cuba and the ways Afro-Cuban, African-American solidarity movements have attempted to understand the particular problems of Afro-Cuban communities.

## **U.S. Foreign Policy, the Cold War, and Race: Contextualizing Obama’s Cuba Policy**

On November 25, 2016, the death of Fidel Castro, former head of state of the Republic of Cuba and the most popular leader of the 26<sup>th</sup> of July Movement, created turbulence within the international community. For some, his passing represented the end of an oppressive era and the hope for a “democratic” future. For others, it symbolized the triumph of the spirit of revolution, progressive nationalism, and anti-imperialism that emerged forcefully during the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Regardless of one’s ideological position, Fidel Castro’s physical transition embodied the emergence of a new Cuba whose political and economic future is at best unknown and contested. His exit from political life in 2006 due to illness and the subsequent rise of his brother, Raul Castro to the presidency helped to accelerate changes in Cuban domestic and foreign policy that have their roots in the period following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, euphemistically called the *Special Period in Time of Peace* (Special Period).

During the Special Period Cuba was cut off from world markets because of the collapse of the Eastern Bloc led Council for Mutual Economic Assistance (CMEA) and the U.S. economic blockade. Under these conditions Cuba was forced to reassess its commitment to orthodox state socialism, which would have a profound impact on the socioeconomic development of the island. Within this environment, domestic and international criticism of Cuba’s Communist Party (PCC) and Fidel Castro’s leadership gained new traction. From the viewpoint of U.S. economic interests and Miami’s Cuban-American community, the Cuban state and its leadership failed to admit to the problems and inefficiencies “endemic” to socialist economies, and the limits on personal and political freedom imposed by a one-party state. This perspective was a natural extension of Cold War policies that first emerged in 1960 during the Eisenhower administration in response to the Cuban Revolution’s nationalization of American assets and key foreign-owned industries. John F. Kennedy’s *Proclamation 3447* in 1962, which put into place the embargo on trade with Cuba, set a precedent for U.S. foreign policy that would characterize both Republican and Democratic administrations for the next 55 years.

In an attempt to further isolate Cuba the Reagan administration designated Cuba a “state sponsor of terrorism” in 1982. In 1992, H.W. Bush would strengthen economic sanctions with the signing of the *Cuban Democracy Act*; the Clinton administration would follow in 1996 with the *Cuban Liberty and Solidarity Act*, and from 2001-2009, the administration of G.W. Bush reaffirmed U.S. foreign policy’s commitment to isolate Cuba from the American public and international markets through strengthening travel and remittance restrictions. The infamous *Bush Doctrine* would intimately link U.S security and defense strategies to regime change in Cuba and the promotion of liberal democracy. (Badella, 2015)

In December of 2014, the Obama administration attempted to break with the policies of the Cold War arguing for the “normalization” of relationships with Cuba. Largely done through the mechanism of executive orders, it committed itself to foreign policy strategies that would advocate the use of soft power and diplomacy in sharp contrast to previous administrations. Although it did not abandon the objectives of promoting regime change and liberal democracy, it declared the policies of previous administrations a resounding failure in their capacity to create the necessary conditions for fundamental political and economic transformation on the island. The relaxation of trade, travel, and remittance restrictions along with the removal of Cuba from the state sponsor of terrorism list, the establishment of U.S. and Cuban embassies and Barack Obama’s historic visit to Cuba in March of 2016, sought to quell historic animosity between Cuba and the United States and to make the new path towards normalization irreversible by subsequent administrations. Within this context, a political and economic vacuum was created, which was quickly filled by multiple forces seeking to reshape Cuba’s future. U.S. corporate alliances like *Engage Cuba* and the *U.S. Agricultural Coalition for Cuba* are advocating for an end to the embargo to spur economic growth in the United States. In sharp contrast, Cuban American politicians like Sen. Marco Rubio (Republican) and Rep. Mario Diaz-Balart (Republican) were extraordinarily critical of the Obama administration’s normalization strategy by characterizing it as capitulating to an oppressive regime that historically violates the human rights of Cuban citizens. In addition, within Cuba several opposition groups have emerged since the onset of the *Special Period*. Often referred to as the *Cuban Dissident Movement*, groups and personalities like the Ladies in White, the Varela Project, the Patriotic Union of Cuba and internationally acclaimed blogger Yoani Maria Sanchez-Cordero sharply criticize the Cuban state for political repression of dissident voices and a struggling economy, hence, Sanchez (2017) argues that:

This December the National Assembly of People's Power acknowledged the negative numbers that reality made clear long ago: Cuba is not growing, production is not recovering, and the so-call Raulist reforms have not given citizens a better life. The island is heading toward the abyss of defaults, cuts in vital sectors of the economy, and continued stagnation. In other places, the rulers would resign before the panorama facing the nation, due in part to bad management. However, since the general president did not win office by a popular vote, no one can punish him at the ballot boxes in the next elections, to the opposition that has demanded his departure, the iron fist of repression and punishment is always applied (Sanchez, 2013).

Within this socio-historical context, the question of racial inequality consistently emerges as a political football to defend or discredit the merits of the Cuban Revolution.

### **Racial Inequality and Freedom: The Nexus for Afro-Cuban and African-American Solidarity**

For some, the existence of racial inequality is a testament to the failures of the Cuban Revolution's leadership and the mythology surrounding socialism's capacity to eliminate racism. Carlos Moore, noted Africana studies scholar and Cuban expatriate, has been the foremost proponent of this position. Moore (2010) argues:

I do not see socialist Cuba as "less" or "more" racist than pre-1959 Cuba. What has shifted is the consciousness that now exist among blacks of their overall inferior position in society, despite the Revolution. No doubt because of the socioeconomic transformations brought about by the socialist reforms, blacks as a whole enjoy greater educational access today. Yet, they remain crushingly at the bottom, whereas whites continue crushingly at the top. Such is the equation of power that before and after the Revolution prevails in Cuba (Obejas, 2010).

For those like Afro-Cuban scholar Esteban Morales-Dominguez, the Cuban Revolution is not a perfect project; it has its flaws and contradictions, yet it has improved dramatically the conditions of African people in the western hemisphere comparatively speaking. He contends:

In spite of the racism that still exists in Cuban society, we can argue that the black and mulatto population on the island is the most educated and healthy group of African descendants in this hemisphere, and that no other country has done so much to eliminate racial injustice and discrimination as has Cuba (Morales-Dominguez, 2013, p.11) Cuba is the only country in the world in which blacks and mestizos have their government as their ally (Morales-Dominguez, p.192).

These two conflicting perspectives would surface in the American and international press during the Obama administration's first term. In November of 2009, Carlos Moore with prominent African-American activists and scholars Eva Caruthers and David Covin, drafted and circulated a petition entitled *Acting On Our Conscience: A Declaration of African-American Support for the Civil Rights Struggle in Cuba* (Moore, 2009). The petition was in response to the imprisonment of Darsi Ferrer on July 21, 2009. Ferrer, an Afro-Cuban dissident, physician, and founder of the Juan Bruno Zayas Health and Human Rights Center in Cuba, was accused of "attempting to illegally acquire building materials" (Reporters Without Borders, 2009) to repair his home in Havana. Members of the Cuban dissident community suggest that the arrest was politically motivated and based on his activism and critique of the Cuban health system in addition to a proposed demonstration that was planned a few weeks earlier dubbed *Journey of a Lifetime*. (Reporters Without Borders, 2009). For the signatories, notwithstanding the achievements and the international popularity of the Cuban Revolution, the attempt by the Cuban state to suppress the political activities of Afro-Cuban activists was unacceptable. Hence,

At this historic juncture, we also do believe that we cannot sit idly by and allow for decent, peaceful and dedicated civil rights activists in Cuba, and the black population as a whole, to be treated with callous disregard for their rights as citizens and as the most marginalized people on the island (Moore, 2009).

A month prior to the circulation of the petition, in October of 2009, Abdias Nascimento, noted Afro-Brazilian activist and Africana studies scholar, sent a letter to Raul Castro and Luiz da Silva, president of Brazil, calling for the release of Ferrer. Nascimento situated Ferrer's activities within the context of "the character, life history and moral values" of the Cuban Black Movement (Nascimento, 2009). The petition organized by Moore, Caruthers, and Covin endeavored to support Nascimento's efforts by amassing a number of noteworthy African-American scholars and activists who would take a position on racial inequality in Cuba. Included among the initial signatories were elder activist and artist Ruby Dee, Black Panther Party activist and Emory University law professor Kathleen Cleaver, Molefi Kete Asante, founder of Temple University's Department of African-American Studies (now Department of Africology and African American Studies), noted public intellectual Cornel West and Black Liberation theologian and pastor Jeremiah Wright Jr. In the same month that the petition surfaced, well-known Afro-Jamaican scholars Rex Nettleford, Rupert Lewis, Barry Chevannes, and Maureen Warner-Lewis would pen a similar letter to Raul Castro locating Ferrer's activism in the tradition of Marcus Garvey, the U.N.I.A., and Robert Nesta Marley. (Nettleford, Chevannes, Lewis, Warner-Lewis, 2009).

In December of 2009, Afro-Cuban intellectuals within Cuba would draft their own response to the petition entitled *Message From Cuba to African-American Intellectuals and Artists*. Published in the *Granma*, the official newspaper of the PCC, Afro-Cuban artists and intellectuals like Nancy Morejon, Esteban Morales, and Miguel Barnet challenged the assumptions of the petition arguing for a clearer analysis of the fight against racism in Cuba since 1959. They characterized the petition as a “malicious intent of adding respectable voices from the Afro-American community to the anti-Cuban campaign that attempts to undermine our sovereignty and identity.” (Morejon, N., Barnet, M. & Morales, E., 2009) The petition, they argued, ignored the multiple ways the Cuban state has supported the economic and sociocultural development of Afro-Cubans and the fight against racial inequality. The response cited the establishment of the *Jose Antonio Aponte Commission for the Fight Against Racism and Discrimination* in addition to Fidel Castro’s own admission that racism in Cuba is an ongoing problem despite the gains of the Revolution.

Fidel Castro, in a dialog that took place in Havana with Cuban and foreign teachers, commented how "even in societies like Cuba, that arose from a radical social revolution where the people had reached full and total legal equality and a level of revolutionary education that threw down the subjective component of discrimination, it still exists in another form," He described it as objective discrimination, a phenomenon associated with poverty and a historical monopoly on knowledge (Morejon, N., Barnet, M. & Morales, E., 2009).

African-American activists and scholars historically linked to the Cuban Solidarity movement in the United States would follow suit drafting the position statement *We Stand With Cuba!: African-Americans Express Solidarity With the Revolution*. (Anderson, S.E., Gibbs, J.P., Mealy, R., Muhammad, S. & Van Der Meer, T.M, 2009). They criticized Acting on Our Conscience for being an opportunistic attempt by Carlos Moore to create divisions within the African-American Cuban Solidarity movement and to discredit socialism as a viable alternative to capitalism. They would argue:

We, the undersigned, believe that the Carlos Moore originated petition is designed to create a wedge in the African-American support base for Cuba. Moore's petition is also an attempt to dismiss Cuba as a modern example of how socialism is a practical system that ensures an equitable distribution of its resources for all Cubans (Anderson, S.E., Gibbs, J.P., Mealy, R., Muhammad, S. & Van Der Meer, T.M, 2009).

To buttress their position, the signers noted Cuba's historical support of national liberation movements in Africa, the racial diversity of Cuba's legislative body, the National Assembly of People's Power, Cuba's provision of full medical school scholarships to American students committed to assisting underserved communities as well as rampant racial and economic inequality in the United States. In addition, they criticized discourse that suggests that within Cuba there is not healthy dialogue about the contemporary existence of racism.

The criticisms about the presence of racism in Cuba are being addressed within the framework of the Cuban Government and civil society. There is and has been fierce debates and policy changes inside these structures when it comes to eradicating 500 years of racism in Cuba (Anderson, S.E., Gibbs, J.P., Mealy, R., Muhammad, S. & Van Der Meer, T.M, 2009).

Noted scholars and activists like Gerald Horne, Rosemari Mealy, Saladin Muhammad, William Sales, Amina and Amiri Baraka, and Askia Toure argued for a renewed commitment to the Cuban Solidarity Movement in addition to protecting Cuba from external forces that sought to use racism as a propaganda tool to discredit the gains of the Revolution and to create internal conflicts within Cuban society.

Historically speaking, the issue of racial oppression has served as the crucible through which relationships between Afro-Cubans and African-Americans have been formed. For at least a century before the Cuban Revolution, African-Americans and Afro-Cubans built transnational networks to address problems shared and peculiar to both the external and internal realities of Afro-Cubans and African-Americans. Starting in the 19<sup>th</sup> century abolitionists like Frederick Douglas, Martin Delaney, and Henry Highland Garnet addressed forcefully the linkages between the abolishment of slavery in the United States and Cuba, freedom for descendants of Africa in the Americas, and the Cuban War for Independence from Spain. As Lisa Brock argues, these sensibilities would extend well into the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century:

Long before 1959 Cubans and African-Americans had forged working relationships: abolitionists jointly formed organizations, leftists and trade unionists exchanged strategies, and journalists, novelists and poets aroused mutual sensibilities. On a mass level, musicians and baseball players actually shared the same cultural venues, entertaining millions of regular Black folk in Cuba and in the United States. (Brock, 1994, p.1)

In March 1959, Castro announced a public antidiscrimination campaign that promised to fulfill late 19<sup>th</sup> century aspirations to build a raceless and unified Cuba. (Benson, 2016) And by the 1980s, Black and mulato Cubans had virtually the same life expectancy, high school education rates, and percentage of professional positions as white Cubans in sharp contrast to the United States and Brazil where significant disparities existed between whites and blacks in each of these markers of equality (Benson, 2016).

This commitment inspired African-American activists and social movement organizations to recast Cuba as the model of “what could be” given the conditions of African-descendant communities in the Americas in the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. For example, in the Summer of 1960 members of the *Fair Play for Cuba Committee*, Robert F. Williams, Amiri Baraka, Julian Mayfield, John Henrik Clarke, Sarah Wright, William Worthy, and Harold Cruse, were invited by Fidel Castro to the July 26<sup>th</sup> Movement celebrations in Havana. Upon their return to the U.S., they would advance the idea that “the revolution was promoting racial equality” (Bevenuti, 2015, p. 131). In 1961, Robert F. Williams would seek political asylum in Cuba to escape state repression because of his commitment to organizing armed self-defense units to combat white supremacist violence in Monroe, North Carolina. Shadowing this precedent, Eldridge Cleaver (1968), Huey Newton (1974), and Assata Shakur (1984) would do the same seeking refuge from COINTELPRO an FBI counterintelligence program designed to disrupt the activities of the Communist Party of the United States in 1956. It expanded in the 1960s to include a number of other domestic groups, such as the Ku Klux Klan, the Socialist Workers Party, and the Black Panther Party, which ended in 1971. Congress and the American people would later criticize COINTELPRO for abridging first amendment rights and for other reasons. Inspired by Cuba’s commitment to Third World Internationalism, Angela Davis and Kwame Ture would visit Cuba in 1967 and 1972, respectively, to show solidarity with the Cuban Revolution (Bevenuti, 2015). Thus, transnational networks between African-Americans, Afro-Cubans, and the Cuban state deepened during this period. Black Studies advocates embraced the Cuban Revolution as one of its own. Multiple scholars and activists began to write about Cuba and its relevance to African emancipatory politics globally.

The *Black Scholar* has had special issues on Cuba in 1973, 1977, 1984, and 2005. The U Mass journal, *Contributions in Black Studies* published a special issue in 1994, “Ethnicity, Gender, Culture and Cuba.” *Souls*, then a journal from Columbia University under the editorship of Manning Marable, published a special issue in 1999 “Race and Revolution in Cuba: African-American Perspectives.” (Akalimat, 2013, p. 81)

On the ground, African-American activists, often in cooperation with other progressive communities of color and white leftists, would develop a vibrant Cuban solidarity movement that would expand discourse on the Cuban Revolution within the United States and abroad as well as contributing material and organizational support to its goals and objectives. Under the leadership of Rev. Lucius Walker, in 1967, the New York-based Interreligious Foundation for Community Organization (IFCO) would be founded to “support oppressed peoples in their struggle for justice and self-determination.” (Brett, 1994, p. 785). In 1988, IFCO would launch the project *Pastors for Peace* to lend material support to developing countries and the poor in Central America who were negatively impacted by U. S. foreign policy. In 1992, IFCO would extend the project to Cuba, challenging U.S. Cold War policies and the blockade (Brett, 1994). In 1999, it would become the managing organization for medical school scholarships granted by Fidel Castro to American students interested in becoming physicians to provide healthcare to underserved communities in the United States. The All African People’s Revolutionary Party and the Malcolm X Grassroots Movement are other notable examples of organizations that have continued to nurture and maintain linkages to Afro-Cuban intellectuals, activists, and the Cuban state. Following Fidel Castro’s second historic visit to Harlem, New York, in October 1995, Manning Marable would reflect upon the broad appeal the Cuban Revolution had within the African-American community. He recalled:

The enthusiastic acclaim Fidel Castro received that evening was absolutely genuine. No white political leader, not even President Clinton, would ever come as close to receiving this kind of approval from literally every sector of the African-American community. (Marable, 1999, p. 7)

This broad appeal, however, did not necessarily reflect a commitment by African-Americans to socialism ideologically speaking; it was more an expression of their perception of the tangible benefits Afro-Cubans received from the Revolution in addition to Fidel Castro’s personality and proclivity for speaking directly to African-Americans in the United States as an oppressed community. Activist and scholar James Early argues:

Support for Cuba among U.S. African-Americans, nonetheless, is uneven and inconsistent. It is not characteristically ideological and political with respect to socialism; rather, it focuses on racial progress and the vibrancy of Afro-Cuban culture (Early, 1999, p. 48).

Although it seems as if African-Americans looked favorably at the Cuban Revolution, historically within African-American activist communities debates have raged over its promises, successes, and failures. As early as May 1961, the NAACP's *The Crisis* published an article by Afro-Cuban activist Juan Rene Bentancourt entitled "Castro and the Cuban Negro." It criticized the July 26<sup>th</sup> Movement and its leadership for dismantling Afro-Cuban forms of self-organization in the name of progressive social change. He argued that no regime in Cuba, from the Cuban War of Independence to the July 26<sup>th</sup> Movement, had substantively addressed the issue of racial discrimination.

I insist that the Negroes have specific rights to defend and that none of the revolutions, neither those for independence, nor the Communist, nor this one for democratic restoration, has had or will have automatic effects against racial discrimination. Those who affirm that the condemnation of the ills of the Negro and the demand for their elimination divides Cubans and creates racial problems are either naïve or unconsciously anti-Negro (Bentancourt, 1961, p. 274).

At the same time, Bentancourt's criticisms were decidedly anti-Communist. He perceived the goals of the Revolution as problematic given its propensity to tax Afro-Cuban organizations for state projects like "agrarian reform, the military, planes and industrialization" (Bentancourt, 1961, 272). In addition, he preferred that Cuban business owners cut and redistribute their profits to their workers rather than have the state nationalize private property. For Bentancourt, Castro's leadership sought to create patterns of "sub-human living" (Bentancourt, 1961, 274). The publication of his essay in *The Crisis* reflected ideological divisions within the Black Freedom Movement (BFM) in the U.S., specifically the waning of the Civil Rights era and the ascension of the Black Power Movement with its strong anti-capitalist leanings. Within this context, traditional Civil Rights leadership would often capitulate to the anti-communism and red baiting that surfaced during the early stages of the Cold War. The Eisenhower and Kennedy administration's policies towards Cuba during this period would bolster these tendencies. Black Power activists like Robert F. Williams, Eldridge Cleaver, and Stokely Carmichael (Kwame Ture), although critical of capitalism, would leave Cuba questioning the Revolution's commitment to eliminating racial inequality because of its program to dismantle forms of self-organization among Afro-Cubans and their relative absence in the upper leadership levels of the PCC and the Cuban state.

The publishing of Carlos Moore's *Castro, the Blacks and Africa*, in 1988, would extend the contours of the debate. It struck a chord within the BFM, specifically divisions between "Black Nationalists" and "Black Radicals."

By 1988, the Cuban Revolution had proclaimed itself a relative success. Because of its alliance with the Soviet Union and the CMEA, Cuba had achieved a level of socioeconomic progress and “equality” unparalleled when compared to developing countries around the world, in particular those that claimed a commitment to the socialist path.

According to political economist Carmelo Mesa-Lago, the Soviet-styled, centralist-planning strategies of the Revolution had achieved high standards for Cuban citizens in healthcare, education, employment, pensions, and equality in distribution. (Mesa-Lago, 1998) “At the end of the 1980s Cuba had one of the most egalitarian income distributions in the world” (Mesa-Lago, 1998). In addition, Cuba was playing an important role in advancing the development of the African continent, in particular providing educational opportunities to African students, medical assistance to African countries with poor healthcare systems, and military support during Angola’s war for independence, which contributed significantly to the defeat of white minority rule in the Southern African region. Cuba’s economic growth, however, was heavily dependent on Soviet subsidies. Still reliant on sugar for export earnings, Cuba received close to twice the international value from the Soviet Union in addition to paying below world market prices for Soviet crude oil (Dolan, 2007).

In essence, economic development and consumption in Cuba was fundamentally tied to the growth and expansion of the Soviet economy and the CMEA. Moore’s 1988 text would argue that although African-descendant communities benefitted from the growth of the Cuban economy through greater access to healthcare, education, and the material benefits of the Revolution, they remained marginalized from the centers of Cuban political power, national culture, and history. In addition, Cuba’s foreign policy towards Africa, Third-World internationalism and support of African-American activists and social movements was characterized as an opportunistic attempt by the Castro regime to consolidate power in the face of governing a growing, predominantly Afro-Cuban population and strategically locating itself internationally on the side of the socialist camp and the “oppressed” in the context of the Cold War (Moore, 1991). Moore’s text appealed to a segment of African-American activists historically dismayed by the ideological influence of white, left sociopolitical theory on the BFM, the dogma that socialism automatically eliminates racism and white supremacy, in addition to the disproportionate influence of the Soviet Union on the domestic and foreign policy of newly independent African states. During this same period Moore was criticized by Afro-Cuban and African-American solidarity activists for supporting the anti-socialist and anti-Castro rhetoric of the U.S. state and Cuban-Americans in Miami attempting to create conditions for regime change on the island. Nevertheless, despite internal, ideological conflict over the merits of *Castro, the Blacks and Africa* most agree that racism has not disappeared in Cuba and remains an enduring obstacle to the success of the Cuban revolutionary project. Hence, Morales-Dominguez argues that:

Not dealing with a problem of such importance would continue to engender bewilderment, ignorance, and social discomfort in those who suffer from discrimination, whether directly or as a result of not having acquired an anti-discriminatory ethic. Avoidance of the issue would lead to a level of social hypocrisy that would turn the racial problem into an endemic ill, with consequences for societal coexistence, the nation, and Cuban culture. This problem is something we must not leave to future generations (Morales-Dominguez, 2013, p. 26-27).

## **The New Economy, Race and the Environment: African-Centered Political Ecology Perspectives**

African-American and Afro-Cuban approaches to the Cuban solidarity movement post 1959 have, for the most part, been driven theoretically by the assumption that the survival of socialism in Cuba is a necessary pre-condition for the elimination of structural racism. From a socialist perspective, the capacity to eliminate inequality is fundamentally linked to the equitable distribution of wealth and the state's capacity to provide access to "true needs" i.e. food, housing, clothing, healthcare, education, the arts, recreation, meaningful work, etc. Ensuring the perpetual growth of the national economy, while at the same time guaranteeing the egalitarian distribution of national income, is perceived as necessary to create a classless society. In the context of Cuba, this includes eliminating racial inequality. Cuba's approach to socialism, however, was altered significantly with the onset of the Special Period. The collapse of the Cuban economy led to severe shortages in food, energy, medicine, and foreign currency. Accordingly, Laverty (2011) suggest that,

Following the demise of the socialist bloc in 1989, and the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, Cuba entered an acute era of economic hardship referred to domestically as the "Special Period." Financial assistance from the Soviet Union was rapidly phased out, and the Cuban economy deteriorated sharply along with the living conditions of its citizens. Estimates of the decline in GDP, between 1989 and 1993, range from 29% to 40%. Cuba experienced a loss of demand for Cuban products at home and abroad, as well as a slowdown in the infusion of new technologies into the supply side of the Cuban economy (Laverty, 2011, p. 9).

Under Fidel Castro's leadership, the Cuban state initiated multiple reforms to keep the country afloat. These included (1) the expansion of tourism to earn foreign currency, (2) the creation of a dual-currency system and the legalization of the U.S. dollar, (3) the legalization of self-employment which allowed private, market activity in areas such as tourism and agriculture, (4) increased dependence on remittances from Cuban-Americans to gain access to U.S. currency, and (5) the formation of an alliance with Venezuela, under the leadership of Hugo Chavez, to subsidize Cuban oil imports. Raul Castro would advance these reforms following his ascendancy to the presidency in 2008.

In April 2011, the PCC would meet to discuss and craft policies consistent with the demands of what has been dubbed the *New Economy*. In doing so, a 32-page document entitled *Project of Economic and Social Policy Guidelines for the Party and the Revolution* was drafted. It sought to provide a policy framework for institutionalizing the new changes. Significant alterations to the Cuban economy included (1) greater access to consumer goods and services i.e. cell phones, DVD players, microwaves, and other appliances and entrance to resorts and hotels, (2) the transformation of former state enterprises into worker's cooperatives, (3) the removal of food items from the *libreta* (ration card) pushing food access into local market activity with price controls, (4) the liberalization of regulations associated with foreign direct investment e.g. allowing for 99-year land leases to foreign companies, (5) the legalization of the buying and selling of homes and automobiles, and (6) the decentralization of state farms allowing for usufruct access to land for Cuban citizens interested in pursuing farming. The onset of the Special Period and the Cuban state's response also created new conditions for a reassessment and renewed discussion on the problem of racial inequality however; Afro-Cubans were negatively impacted by the policy changes. For example, the expansion of tourism created new opportunities for jobs and access to foreign currency, but the Cuban tourist sector heavily markets to Western European, Canadian, and U.S. tourists, an emphasis that produces three problems. The first is a cultural orientation to tourism privileging Eurocentric notions of race and consumerism. Second, as an extension of this cultural orientation, the Cuban tourist sector's regulatory agencies, managerial class, and employees are overwhelmingly white. Third, because the tourist sector is a vehicle for access to hard foreign currency, white Cuban citizens who own *casa particulares* (rental homes), *paladars* (home-based restaurants) or work in hotels, all-inclusive resorts, etc., have higher incomes because of tips and bonuses relative to the general Cuban population. Invariably, this creates income inequality along racial lines. An additional example is the issue of remittances. In 2016, remittances to Cuba through formal and informal means reached a record \$3.4 billion (Morales, 2017). Cuban-Americans sending remittances overwhelming are white Cubans. White Cubans benefit most from the new changes in state policy because remittances play a large role in supplementing family incomes. They provide much-needed capital to take advantage of opportunities created by the new economic reforms i.e. the purchase of homes and automobiles, the creation of small businesses, improvements on family homes, and the increase in disposable income. In response to the conditions created by the new economic reforms, African-American and Afro-Cuban activists and scholars have pointed out the glaring racial disparities that have resurfaced in Cuban society. Hence,

The way power is distributed in present-day Cuban society does not go beyond what existed prior to 1959; within society white dominance is still forcefully expressed, especially at the level of what is called the "new economy." This is especially evident in the absence of blacks in the upper leadership levels of the state, government, and institutions of civil society in general, although not in the party structure (Morales-Dominguez, 2013, p. 24-25).

In addition, because of the influx of foreign direct investment, foreign tourists and the reduction of travel restrictions, racist stereotypes and practices have reemerged forcefully. The expansion of the sale of racist caricatures of Afro-Cuban women in tourist markets and the increased policing of Afro-Cuban youth in Havana tourist enclaves are two notable examples. To resolve these problems, African-American and Afro-Cuban activists and scholars argue for greater state regulation of the new economic reforms to prevent the growth of socioeconomic and racial inequality. Dominguez-Morales (2010) suggest:

The only way to solve this is through the strict monitoring of equal opportunities for all jobs, especially in the new economy, that's to say in *tourism and joint venture companies involving foreign capital* (my emphasis); in education and intensive cultural work. (Grogg, 2010)

Underlying this vision of “equal opportunity” for Afro-Cubans is an implicit urban bias, specifically the notion of linking equality and development to mass-consumption opportunities created by tourism and foreign direct investment. African-American and Afro-Cuban intellectuals and solidarity activists typically share this perspective.

## **Decentralization, Environmental Protection, and the New Economy**

Since its inception, the Cuban socialist project has been driven by the idea that perpetual economic growth is both possible and ideal. During the pre-Special Period era (1960-1989), it was heavily influenced by the Soviet model, which advocated centralized economic planning and rapid industrialization. This system relegated Cuba to a producer of sugar for CMEA markets based on the flawed philosophy of comparative advantage. Although this model contributed to the rapid growth of the Cuban economy and increased the consumption of goods and services among the Cuban people, it had negative impacts on the environment and it increased Cuba's dependence on the Soviet Union and the CMEA for food, energy, and key agricultural inputs (Sawyer, 2006). Diaz-Briquets and Perez-Lopez (1995) suggest:

Urban pollution, for instance, could be partly traced to Cuba's extreme reliance on inefficient and highly contaminating Soviet and Eastern European-built vehicles and factories. In the agricultural sector, a practice that resulted in much environmental damage was the promotion of a Soviet style, large-scale state farm production model based on widespread mechanization, heavy chemical inputs (e.g., fertilizers and herbicides), and extensive irrigation (Diaz-Briquets and Perez-Lopez, 1995).

From an ecological perspective, it is important to understand that this model of development is not sustainable. The consumption habits of the Cuban population were heavily dependent on resources beyond the Caribbean bioregion. In addition, patterns of waste disposal and manufacturing at the national level compromised Cuba's biodiversity and its ecological resiliency.

During the post-Special Period era (1989-present), Cuba's initial move towards a mixed economy under Fidel Castro's reforms was interestingly contradictory. Prior to the collapse of relationships with the Soviet Union and the CMEA, progressive-minded Cuban scientists had begun to critique Cuba's attempt to imitate the Soviet economic model. They advocated for a recommitment to self-sufficiency, environmental protection, and an ecological approach to economic development. The Special Period and the U.S. embargo had successfully isolated Cuba from gaining access to needed goods and services. This created ideal conditions for the Cuban state and its leadership to take seriously the recommendations of these progressive scientists. The Cuban agriculture sector was the first to embrace these proposals substantively. "New" forms of land tenure arrangements emerged. Massive state farms were broken up into smaller units and organized into farmer-owned cooperatives to encourage Cubans to return to rural areas to produce food and to limit the demographic pressure on cities. In Cuba's major cities, urban agriculture exploded. In addition, a shift away from industrial to agroecological-based food production methods was encouraged nationwide. Cuba, in simple terms, was forced to depend on itself.

Parallel to these changes, a growing consensus was developing internationally around the issue of climate change. At the 1992 Earth Summit in Brazil, Fidel Castro would link Cuba's new model to survive the Special Period with a commitment to environmentally sustainable development. Consequently, he (1993) argued:

[The special period] is a period of readjustment requiring maximum economizing and austerity in economic and social policies, along with many creative initiatives, a large number of which have come directly from the people. Many of the steps taken as a result of the special period fit in with the strategic lines prepared by the Revolution. Some of them have helped accelerate the policies put into effect by the country in defense of the environment. (Castro, 1993)

Following Cuba's participation at the Earth Summit, the National Assembly of People's Power amended the Cuban constitution to incorporate sustainable-development principles. (Whittle and Santos, 2006) In addition, it formally adopted the Rio Declaration on Environment and Development in 1993, established the Ministry of Science, Technology, and Environment (CITMA) in 1994, and created the National Environmental Strategy and the Law of the Environment in 1997 (Whittle and Santos, 2006).

These policies would result in Cuba being named the only sustainable society according to the World Wildlife Fund's 2006 Living Planet Report. Despite these commitments, Cuba continued to expand the tourist sector in an effort to replace the foreign exchange earnings once provided by sugar exports. It is important to consider that the growing dependency on the tourist sector and foreign direct investment increased both racial inequality and Eurocentric mass consumption values among the Cuban population, which threatens the environment. This tension remains and has expanded under the new economic reforms instituted under the leadership of Raul Castro.

Despite the obvious parallels between racism, the pursuit of mass consumption (during the pre- and post-Special Period eras), and environmental degradation, African-American and Afro-Cuban solidarity activists and scholars rarely link environmental justice issues to socioeconomic justice issues within the context of the Cuban Revolution and the New Economy. With few exceptions they remain primarily concerned with how the new reforms lock Afro-Cubans out of the material "benefits" of the New Economy, in addition to exacerbating racial and socioeconomic inequalities. This, in turn, informs the types of strategies they propose to resolve the problems.

### **Towards Ideological Clarity: Afro-Cuban Culture, Race and the Environment**

From an African-centered political ecology perspective there are a number of things to consider that can clarify our understanding of contemporary Cuba and the unique problems of Afro-Cuban communities. First, *catch up development* is not possible for the Cuban nation. Sustaining the typical western, urban-centered, middle-class lifestyle is not physically possible for all nations given the ecological limits of the earth. Both the former Soviet and the New Economy models are predicated on perpetual growth-oriented economic principles to meet the growing demand for consumer goods and services not produced on the island. In a 2015 interview, noted Cuban economist Juan Triana Cordovi posits that:

Cuba is a country with fairly generalized middle-class cultural and behavioral patterns, with consumer habits typical of the middle class and lower middle class. *That's been one of the great achievements of the revolution* (my emphasis): to pull people, many people, out of poverty, to educate these people, or at least afford them a high level of schooling. As these people become more educated, their aspirations, consumer habits and cultural patterns change also (Serrat, 2015).

Hence, the socialist goal of constructing a "classless society" is compromised because economic inequality is reproduced not simply for political reasons (i.e. racial discrimination and the unequal distribution of power), but for ecological reasons. Most western, middle-class consumer goods and services are produced using natural resources that are limited and typically unavailable within the Caribbean bioregion.

In addition, they are not produced within Cuba. The cost is expensive and can be acquired only with foreign currency. Consistently, this creates conditions where those who have greater access to hard foreign currency can purchase more often goods and services that are perceived as valuable from the perspective of western, middle-class values. Typically white Cubans are the beneficiaries. Central to this problem is the dichotomy between true needs and false needs. In other words, what do human beings require on a material level to secure happiness and genuine human development? This remains an unanswered question. Within the context of western modernity, the prevailing discourse associates happiness with expanding individual and familial consumption. This is at the heart of the western, middle-class ethos. The Cuban socialist model has attempted to pursue these values within a collectivist framework. Its emphasis on foreign direct investment and tourism immortalizes the principles of mass consumption, socioeconomic inequality, and perpetual growth despite the Cuban state's commitment to the equitable distribution of national income through an expansive welfare state. Within this context, racism and the environment converge to limit Afro-Cubans access to the "good life."

These consumer illusions drive people to spend money they do not have on things they may not want or to buy things for other people who probably do not need them. These commodities are coded with meaning and stratified by their symbolic and monetary worth. This hierarchy of consumer items reinforces class stratification based on the traditional axes of income, occupation, and education. Disadvantaged and marginalized groups use material possessions to both simulate and satirize privilege. Yet in their actual purchase of consumer goods to make a symbolic statement, they unwittingly fund the engines of inequality. This kind of material posturing also turns group members against one another as each vies for stylistic superiority (Pattillo-McCoy, 1999, p. 59).

To engage these problems with greater clarity, Afro-Cuban and African-American solidarity activists and intellectuals must begin to wed an environmental consciousness to a class and race consciousness. This can be approached in two strategic ways. First, there is much value in the eco-philosophies fundamental to the Afro-Cuban cultural traditions of Lucumi, Palo, Arara, Abakua, and Ganga. They are not simply "religious" systems. They are, in fact, cultural structures that prescribe ways for human communities to live in harmony with nature. Indigenous societies in general and African indigenous culture in particular developed a socio-ecological praxis grounded in the assumption that nature has value independent of its use value to human communities. Indigenous African socioeconomic systems emerged within this ethical context. Two of its core principles are (1) the commons i.e. the human right of all responsible adults to access land to provide directly for their basic needs and (2) a commitment to the maintenance of biodiversity and ecosystem integrity because nature was, in fact, the most direct expression of the creator and the vehicle through which the ancestors encoded relevant socio-cultural knowledge for future generations. The ethics, conceptual language, and ceremonies of indigenous African cultural systems are relevant in constructing new paradigms to explore and negotiate our understanding of the difference between false needs and true needs.

This is extremely important to consider given the drive for a globalized, mass consumer centered culture. A strictly secular humanism, as articulated by Cuban socialist ideology, is not adequate because it does not speak to the deeper questions of human identity, agency, and happiness or to our relationships to community and nature. This tendency partially exists because of the dominant influence of the philosophy of historical materialism on Cuban sociopolitical and economic thought.

Second, Afro-Cuban and African-American solidarity activists and intellectuals must find new sites for engagement. Within the context of the New Economy, two important reforms have surfaced that have yet to be explored fully as important spaces to improve the quality of life for Afro-Cubans. The first is the new wave of agrarian reform laws. Agrarian reform was a key aspect of the Cuban Revolution. Between 1959-1963, the Cuban state instituted two laws that eliminated large landholdings called *latifundias*. Prior to the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Agrarian Reform Laws “9.4% of the landholders owned 73.3% of the land” (Funes, 2001, p. 4). Tenant farmers, sharecroppers and farm workers were super exploited by U.S. owned sugar companies and local Cuban landowners. Under the agrarian reform laws, close to 30% of the land was redistributed to peasants and 70% was nationalized. As Cuba moved closer to the Soviet model of economic development (1961-1989), the state increased its land holdings (close to 82%) and collectivized agricultural production. Small farming was discouraged in favor of large plantations committed to sugar production for export. Conditions created by the Special Period forced the Cuban state to reconsider this approach. In 1993, Cuba began a new series of land reforms that reduced state ownership to 40%. State-owned farms were broken up and reorganized into *Basic Units of Cooperative Production* (UBPCs). The goal was to return land to small farming cooperatives using agro-ecological approaches to production to increase food self-sufficiency. Raul Castro would extend these reforms in an effort to reduce state control of farmland to approximately 25%. Cuban citizens can apply for “free” access to land through the Ministry of Agriculture. Individual farmers or farming cooperatives hold the land in usufruct. Taking into consideration the significance of these reforms, several questions arise. Are Afro-Cubans participating in the reruralization process? Might this serve as a site of engagement to improve the quality of life for Afro-Cuban communities? Finally, to what degree is Afro-Cuban participation in the reruralization process undermined by the urban bias and the ideological legacy of slavery that associates rural lifeways and farming with drudgery, oppression, and backwardness?

In addition to the recent agrarian reforms, the New Economy advocates for the progressive decentralization of the economy to encourage non-state sector employment to increase economic efficiency and to decrease the burden of the state in the face of declining revenues. “In September 2010, a plan for massive layoffs of state employees was announced, making it known that some 500,000 government jobs would be eliminated by March 2011.” (Lavery, 2011, p. 4) Consequently, to resolve the question of unemployment, the new reforms sought to increase licensing for an expanded list of self-employment categories in “non-strategic” sectors of the Cuban economy.

This included areas such as transportation, barbershops, hair salons, auto mechanics, technical services, and construction. In this context, the reforms advocate for the use of cooperatives as the ideal business model of the New Economy. Worker-owned cooperatives are perceived as compatible with the values of socialism given its emphasis on collective ownership. Most attempts at self-employment require an influx of capital to purchase needed inputs, pay for licensing fees, and to lease or purchase space. Without a strong credit system to support cooperative enterprises, Cuban citizens must depend on other sources of capital. Oftentimes it comes in the form of remittances. Because Afro-Cubans are not the primary beneficiaries of remittance to Cuba they are typically locked out of the emerging, cooperative sector. Several questions arise as a result of these conditions. Historically, Afro-Cuban forms of self-organization like the *cabildos de nacion*, *sociedades de color* and *casa-templos* have been primarily associated with the “religious” activities of Lucumi, Abakua, Arara, Palo, and Ganga, however, what is not always emphasized is their role as mutual-aid societies. Concha-Holmes (2013) suggest:

These cabildos had their own governing body, regulations of conduct, and places to meet where old residents and new arrivals provided assistance for members in such vital matters as burial expenses, health care, and religious ceremonies. They served as social centers that were instrumental in providing a rich space to maintain a cultural memory associated with their distinct African homelands as well as construct a cultural identity that supported the inversion of positions of subordination and dominance creating social, economic, and political outcomes that benefited African descendants. (Concha-Holmes, 2013, p. 493)

In light of this history, in what ways can the socioeconomic traditions of Afro-Cuban forms of self-organization be used as vehicles to enter into the emerging cooperative sector and obtain land under the new agrarian reform laws? Do contemporary Afro-Cuban and African-American solidarity activists and scholars perceive these forms of self-organization as valuable in the contemporary period to resolve socioeconomic problems faced by Afro-Cuban communities? Are indigenous forms of Afro-Cuban self-organization perceived as archaic to contemporary Afro-Cuban and African-American solidarity activists and scholars? Are they perceived as subversive and/or incompatible with the notion of *Cubanidad* (Cuban national identity) from the perspective of the Cuban state? These are important questions to both consider and answer.

In June of 2017 the Trump administration announced its new policy towards Cuba. During the presidential race Trump courted Cuban-Americans hostile to the Obama administration’s commitment to normalization. The new policy attempts to roll back symbolically key aspects of the Obama administration’s reforms, to placate the competing interests of Cuban-American hardliners and U.S. corporate leaders that see Cuba as a logical extension of American markets given its close proximity.

At the same time, both the Cuban state and contemporary Afro-Cuban and African-American solidarity activists advocate for an end to the U.S. embargo. Notwithstanding the glaring ideological differences between the actors involved, an international consensus seems to exist that the economic “benefits” to normalization clearly outweigh its negative aspects. This position however, emerges from an urban-biased perspective. Lisa Brock suggests that Afro-Cuban and African-American solidarity activists must “retool the movement by conjuring up memories that can be used in a political, ideological, and popular way” (Brock, 1999, p. 67). Given the environmental, social, and economic consequences associated with normalization, an African-centered political ecology lens is necessary to clearly see the socioeconomic and environmental challenges this process will create. In turn, re-centering the land question should inform the types of strategies and tactics that will emerge to improve the quality of life of African-descendant communities within Cuba.

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